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Cover by Marshall Frantz

Illustrating *Delay at Antioch*

This magazine is on sale every Wednesday

THE FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY, Publisher, 280 Broadway, NEW YORK, N. Y.

WILLIAM T. DEWART, President

THE CONTINENTAL PUBLISHERS & DISTRIBUTORS, LTD.

3 La Belle Sauvage, Ludgate Hill, London, E.C. 4

PARIS: HACHETTE & CIE

111 Rue Réaumur

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Delay at Antioch

By PHILIP KETCHUM

Author of "Paths of Conquest," "A Sword for Lief the Lucky," etc.

"Deus Vult!" The cry rang high above the clangor of shields and scimitars; and the magic of those words sent a meager, exhausted band of Crusaders against the mightiest army of Islam. A complete novelet of Bretwalda, the mystic axe

I

UNDER the wide tent of Raymond de St. Gilles, the leaders of the crusade gathered for another council. All were there. Tall, red-headed Behemond, Prince of Taranto. Tancred, his cousin. Godfrey de Bouillon, in whose veins ran the blood of Charlemagne. Robert of Normandy, son of England's king. Adhemar, Bishop of Puy. Taticius, the Byzantine general. Peter the Hermit, Guy de Fortney, and many another.

Short of temper were they all. For six

months the siege of Antioch had dragged on and they seemed no closer to taking the city today than when they had first sighted it from the top of the Taurus Hills. Food supplies were low and many of their men were ill. And toward them, along the road from Aleppo, came a great Saracen army. It seemed as though the Crusaders were about to be caught between the forces of Yagi Siyan, Amir of Antioch and the force coming to his relief.

One after another, the leaders spoke their minds. Some favored an immediate assault upon the city, others favored with-

Now the Crusaders, shouting their battle cry, came swarming over the crest of the great wall



drawing until the army of the Byzantine emperor could join them. Some, no doubt, felt willing to give up the entire purpose of the Crusade, for here, in Antioch, they seemed to have come to a barrier which they could not pass.

In the midst of the discussion, Behemond got suddenly to his feet and turned to face Tancred. "Cousin," he said sharply, "where are the two prisoners your men took last night?"

Tancred frowned. "Why ask about them?"

"They were taken when leaving the city by one of the postern gates on the hills, were they not?"

"Aye."

"And they are Saracens, are they not?"

"Again you are right, cousin."

Behemond leaned forward. Though he had not so many followers as some of the others in this council he was gradually assuming the leadership of the Crusade. Quick of mind, cunning, ambitious, he had in him all the attributes of a leader.

"We cannot fall back," he said earnestly. "We must strike. And we must

strike before the Saracen army arrives to make the battle more difficult. For months, now, we have had word from Armenian spies within the walls of Antioch, yet no word have they given us of any weakness of which we could take advantage. Perhaps from these Saracens which my cousin has taken we can learn something to our advantage."

"From a woman and a boy?" asked Tancred sarcastically.

"I have seen the woman," said Behemond. "From her bearing I would guess that she is more than a common prisoner. Have both of them brought here."

TANCRED shrugged and left the tent. Shortly he was back with the two prisoners. The boy was about nine or ten—a thin, ragged urchin, now very frightened. The woman, tall and slender as all Saracen women, was clothed in a gray cloak which reached almost to the ground. A shawl covered her hair and a veil hid all of her face but her eyes and forehead.

Behemond glanced around the group. "Where is Wilton of Mercia?" he asked.

A tall, young man separated himself from a group near Robert of Normandy and came forward. He wore a tunic of chain mail which reached almost to his knees and on his broad chest was the red Crusader's cross. An old, battered helmet covered his short blond hair. His face was thin, gaunt, and somber and his eyes were a cold blue.

"Wilton," said Behemond, "you speak the Saracen tongue. Question this woman. Find out who she is. See what she can tell us of the defenses of Antioch."

Wilton frowned, looked over at the woman. He had little liking for such a task. He had come on this Crusade to help re-capture Jerusalem from the infidels. Fighting, he understood. With his father's great axe in his hands and under the banner of Mercia, there were no odds he would not face. But he had no enthusiasm for questioning prisoners or dealing with spies. He felt only distrust for the cunning of Behemond, the cleverness of Tancred, the intrigues of Raymond de St. Gilles.

"Tell her," said Behemond, "that if she speaks, she and the boy will go free."

Wilton shrugged. Still looking at the woman, he said slowly, "You were taken as you were leaving Antioch. Where you would have gone I do not know but you will be released if you answer my questions truthfully. Do you understand?"

The woman made no answer. Above the veil her dark eyes stared at him blankly.

"How large an army is there still within the walls?" Wilton asked.

The woman remained silent. Her body was very straight and no fear showed in her eyes. One of her hands rested on the shoulder of the boy who stood beside her, his arms around her waist.

"Perhaps you did not understand me," Wilton said. "Unless you answer my questions—"

"Unless I answer your questions," interrupted the woman, her voice low and tense, "I will be degraded, killed. I know that. I expect it. It is thus that you treat all women who fall into your hands."

Wilton bit his lips. There was a measure of truth in what she said. The scum of Europe had followed the path of the Crusaders, and many of the knights themselves had forgotten their vows.

"Who are you?" Wilton asked abruptly.

The woman made no answer.

Wilton tried again. "Tell me," he said, "the number of men at the Bridge Gate."

The woman still did not speak and Behemond, pushing forward, said sharply, "Well, what have you learned, Wilton? Was I right about her?"

Wilton glanced at Behemond and the other leaders. All were leaning forward anxiously. "I have learned nothing," he answered. "But I think that this woman is no ordinary prisoner. I would hold her safely. Perhaps later she will talk. Perhaps—"

"We have no time to wait," broke in the harsh voice of Guy de Fortney. "I will show you how to make her talk."

IN THREE swift strides de Fortney reached the woman's side. He seized the boy, threw him to the ground and bent over him, a knife in his free hand. The woman screamed and rushed toward de Fortney, but Tancred caught and held her in his arms.

"Ask her your questions now, Wilton," de Fortney cried. "She will answer them."

The knife in de Fortney's hand was only inches from the boy's throat. Behemond said, "Yes, Wilton. Ask your questions now."

Wilton stared at the woman. In her struggle to free herself from Tancred's arms the veil had pulled away from her face and he saw that she was hardly more than a girl. She was fair, too, almost as fair of skin as he, and her face was lovely, even now in its agony. "No! No!" she was screaming in the Saracen tongue. "That is al-Hakim, the son of Yagi Siyan. Spare him! Do not kill him!"

Wilton moved forward. He gave no warning of what he intended to do, but suddenly his hand seized de Fortney's wrist. A tall and heavy man was Guy de

Fortney, proud of his strength. Yet now without apparent effort, Wilton brought him upright, away from the Saracen boy. For a moment, while the tent grew still and the men leaned tensely forward, they stood together, chest to chest. Wilton's pressure on de Fortney's wrist tightened. He bent the man's arm sideways, twisted it lower and lower. Perspiration stood out on de Fortney's forehead. His dark eyes clouded. Then suddenly his fingers loosened, and the knife fell to the ground.

Wilton stepped back. "I do not make war on women and children," he said gruffly. "Leave the boy alone."

De Fortney made no answer, though his thin, hawk-like face was twisted with anger and there was hatred in his eyes. Behemond pushed him away. "You are a fool, Wilton," Behemond growled.

"Perhaps a fool," Wilton answered, "but they will never say of me that I tarnished the cross I wear."

Adhemar came forward, a tall heavy figure in his full bishop's robes. "Wilton is right," he announced. "We must get our information in some other way."

The bishop's decision was not questioned. One and all, pilgrim or knight, Greek or Norman, the Crusaders had come to love this Churchman who marched and suffered and fought with them. Behemond and Tancred had nothing more to say. The two prisoners were taken away and the council continued.

WILTON of Mercia turned away from the council tent. He strode to a high point in that meadow where the Crusaders were encamped, and there he sat down and stared at the high-walled town of Antioch. Broad and strong was that wall which encompassed the city. For two miles it ran along the far bank of the Orontes River, then it clambered over a series of little hills and circled to the south. At intervals stood massive square towers, rising to a height of sixty feet. There were five main gates in this nearest portion of the wall and all of them the Crusaders had closed.

But up in the hills there were other

gates through which food was taken into the city by night. Despite the great number of Crusaders, the army could not entirely surround the city and cut off the supplies. Their six months of siege had accomplished nothing. Antioch still stood as a barrier to Jerusalem.

Sprawled all over the broad meadow were the tents of the Crusaders. A motley lot they were: knights from Normandy, England, Italy, France; mercenary soldiers of every nationality; peasant pilgrims from all corners of Europe. It was a miracle that they hung together, a miracle wrought by a symbol and a phrase. The Crusaders' cross and the cry, *Deus vult* had welded them into an army which had fought its way across southern Europe, which had taken Nicaea, which had crossed the Taurus mountains and now stood at the gateway of Syria.

The spirit which had made all that possible was a continual source of wonder to Wilton of Mercia. It was like a living, breathing thing. It had sustained men through hunger and thirst, suffering and privation. The Holy City was in the hands of the infidel Turks and the call to free it had swept the Christian world. It was unthinkable that here their cause should fail.

Wilton's mind turned abruptly to a consideration of what had happened in the council meeting that morning, and a vague feeling of uneasiness came over him. He couldn't place his finger on just what it was that troubled him. He had made an enemy of Guy de Fortney he knew, but quarrels were common in the camp and that did not trouble him. As for the captives, he had helped them little if any. In the privacy of his own tent, Behemond could repeat the scene which Wilton had stopped, if the Norman so desired. Wilton scowled. He wondered what fate awaited the girl whom he had questioned. He could not get the picture of her face out of his mind.

A footstep sounded near him and Behemond's voice said caustically, "What troubles you, Wilton? The Saracen maid?"

Wilton looked around and saw that the tall, heavy Norman was smiling faintly.

"I have no interest in Saracen women," Wilton answered shortly.

"But you are interested in taking Antioch."

"Aye. What man of us isn't?"

"The council," said Behemond. "They still argue while the army of Kerbogha comes nearer and nearer to trapping us."

Wilton's frown deepened. Impregnable though the walls of Antioch might seem, he had long favored an assault rather than the months of delay which they had known.

BEHEMOND moved closer. "Wilton," he said, "I would tell you something in confidence. A week ago a Turkish officer who has been mistreated by Yagi Siyan, the Amir of Antioch, sent word to me that he would open one of the gates to us if I would pledge safety to him and his men."

"Others have made such an offer." Wilton shrugged. "It has come to nothing."

"Others who have made such an offer had not the authority to back their pledge. This man of whom I speak is one who can do what he agrees to do. When I tell you his name you will understand. I speak of Firuz, the Turk."

"Firuz!"

Wilton slowly nodded his head. From word which had trickled into their camp he knew that Firuz commanded the Turks who were helping Yagi Siyan in the defense of Antioch. If he had agreed to open one of the gates to the Crusaders, he could do it.

"Why did you not mention this in the council meeting?" he asked.

"And have the spies of the Saracens learn of it? Nay. Such would have been a foolish thing to do. Save for my cousin Tancred, you are the only one I have told."

"Why have you told me?"

"I need your help."

"In what way?"

Behemond drew a deep breath. "For three days now," he said slowly, "it has been impossible for me to get word to

Firuz. All details of the assault have been arranged. The greater portion of our men are to leave camp for the hills as though they were upon a foraging expedition. Under cover of darkness we are to creep back to the wall at a certain place in the hills near the tower of the Two Sisters. Yet, though all plans are made, I have been unable to set a night for the assault and each day the Saracen army which is coming up the Aleppo road, draws closer."

Wilton stood up. "What would you have me do?"

"Would you dare venture into Antioch? You speak the Saracen tongue, Wilton. You could be trusted. The time is short."

"No man who is a stranger could get past the gates, no matter how well he speaks the language of the Moslems."

"You can get by the gates."

"How?"

"You recall the Saracen maid whom you questioned this morning? She can get you by the gate. She will get you by the gate and take you to Firuz if by so doing she can be assured of the life of—al-Hakim."

Wilton scowled. "You understood her? You heard her call the boy by that name?"

"I heard her call that name and I know that al-Hakim is the name given to the son of Yagi Siyan. The woman, I would guess, is the amir's daughter, Shajar. That is why I feel that she could get you in."

"You are sure that Firuz—"

"I pledge you by the cross of Christ that what I have told you is true, Wilton. I dare trust no common spy. Will you undertake this mission?"

For a long moment, Wilton was silent. Though he cared little for Behemond he could see how vital it was that someone reach Firuz. An open assault on the city would cost the lives of thousands of men. If an entrance could be made through one of the gates, many of those lives might be saved. And time was short. Antioch blocked their way to Jerusalem. Until it fell they could not go on and if they delayed much longer their cause might be lost.

"When would you make the assault?" he asked abruptly.

"An hour before dawn, tomorrow."

Wilton nodded. "Take me to the Saracen maid. I will be your messenger."

II

THE night was clear and cool and the light breeze sweeping down from the hills carried with it the scent of myriad wild flowers. Here and there in the rough, rugged country back of Antioch were groves of olive trees, great laurels, pines. The thin sliver of a moon showed in the sky, attended by countless stars. They gave but little light, and it was quite dark in the shadows of the shrubbery along one of the trails where Wilton and the Saracen maid waited.

They had been there now for quite a while. Occasionally they conversed in low tones. Most of the time they were silent. A long Moslem robe covered Wilton's coat-of-mail. A turban was wrapped around his head. To his chin and jaws was pasted a long, dark beard. By day that beard would not pass muster, but he felt that it would serve in the darkness. Touching it with his hand, he smiled.

"I would make a good Moslem, don't you think?" he said to the girl.

He received no answer, but despite the darkness he could see her turn to look at him. Her name was Shajar, he had discovered, and she was the daughter of Yagi Siyan. He had learned more. She and her brother had been captured when her father had decided to send them to Aleppo where they would be safe if the Crusaders breached the walls of the city. But that didn't mean, Shajar had insisted, that conditions within Antioch were bad. Only her father's caution had prompted that step.

Leaning forward, Shajar said abruptly, "Why must you do this thing? Do you not know that only death awaits those who enter Antioch? Do you think that even to save my brother's life I would betray my city?"

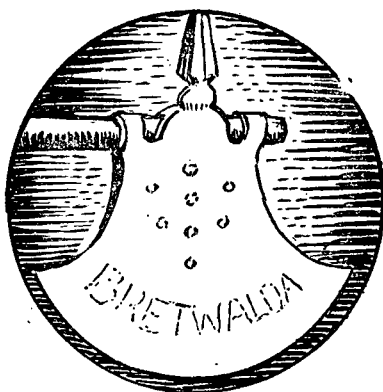
Wilton shrugged. He could think of no adequate answer. He had not told Shajar why he wished to enter Antioch. He had asked her only to pass him through the gates and in return for that, he had Behemond's pledge that no harm would come to her brother.

"Why must you enter Antioch?" asked the girl again.

"I must," said Wilton. "Let us let it go at that."

For a long time the girl was silent, then she asked suddenly, "Where did you learn the Moslem tongue?"

Wilton smiled. "Six years ago I came to the holy land on a pilgrimage. I learned



it then."

Shajar shook her head. "It is hard to think of you as a pilgrim."

"Why?"

"And it is hard to think of you as an infidel, as one of the horde which is despoiling my country."

"Again, why?"

"You asked a moment ago if I did not think that you would make a good Moslem. I can almost imagine that you are like one of my own people. Does that seem strange to you?"

WILTON stared over at the girl. He couldn't see her face, but something in her voice sent a strange excitement pounding through his veins. He had little knowledge of women. His youth had been spent under the rigid discipline of his father and its hours had been taken up with practice in the use of the sword, axe, bow and lance.

Hardly had he attained his manhood when he joined a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. And almost immediately after his return home Pope Urban's call had sent him off on this Crusade. Sometimes he had dreamed of finding some girl as fair as a princess, as wise as his mother. And suddenly, now, he wondered if he hadn't found her.

An instant of doubt flashed across his mind, but he put it aside. Moslem this girl might be—an infidel. Yet that did not matter. The hot blood of youth was in his veins and in his heart there was a deep yearning for this woman—a desire born so suddenly in him that he was frightened.

He leaned forward and said huskily, "Shajar—Shajar—"

The girl didn't move. His arms went out, grasped her. He pulled her close against him, his mouth eagerly seeking her lips.

"Stop!" The word was as sharp as a lash.

"Stop, infidel dog!"

Fingernails scraped across his face. The girl broke free, and by the faint light of the stars he could see that she held one hand across her face. She was breathing heavily.

Wilton stood silent a moment, confused by his anger and his shame.

"I meant you no harm," he said at last, sharply. "Come. By this time the guard should be changed. Let us get on to the city."

Shajar backed away from him. She lifted her veil into place. Without a word she turned and made for the trail which led to one of the small postern gates. . . .

There was no difficulty at the gate. What Shajar said to the guards Wilton didn't know, but the gate was opened without question and they both passed swiftly through it.

Beyond the gate and away from the guards, the girl stopped and said, "I have done what was asked of me. And my brother—"

"You need not fear for him," Wilton

answered. "I have Behemond's pledge that he will be safe."

The girl nodded and then stood silent, her eyes on his face. Wilton's expression was stony. He still felt a hurt and anger from that experience along the trail. He had told himself that what had happened was for the best; yet now once again he was almost painfully aware of the girl's loveliness. Straight and slender was her body and proudly erect was her head.

"There is yet a chance for you to escape," she said suddenly. "Beyond the gate—"

Wilton's eyes moved past the girl. They were standing near one of the high points of the city. Near them were only a few houses. The roadway was deserted. Below lay the town, marked here and there by the domes of its mosques, by narrow, fingerlike minarets pointing up to the sky. Some of those streets down there, Wilton knew, were paved with marble. Qushani tile and mosaic work decorated many of the buildings. In that lower part of the city there was a hanging garden, a fairy wonderland of plants, flowers and bubbling fountains. Not far from it was a coliseum.

And down there the streets would be crowded with dark-browed Turkish soldiers, dusky Saracens, fair Armenians. A thousand torches lighted up the city, some stationary, some moving about as companies of men went from one place to another. To reach the place where he must go, Wilton would have to skirt the fringe of that populous center. Were he too closely questioned, there was little doubt as to what would happen to him.

"There is yet time to turn back," Shajar whispered.

A faint smile touched Wilton's lips and his fingers, slipping under his robe, touched the handle of the great axe strapped to his side. "Nay, Shajar," he answered. "I cannot turn back. Go at once to the house of your father. Stay there until tomorrow." Then without waiting for an answer, he turned and started slowly down the hill, his heavy shoulders bowed, his feet taking the wandering pattern of an old man.

FIRUZ the Turk was a short man, middle-aged, swarthy of complexion. His eyes were keen, and a moment after his soldiers had brought Wilton to him he dismissed them and said bluntly, "How came you here? What word do you bring from Behemond?"

Wilton repeated Behemond's message and the Turk rubbed his hands together. "An hour before dawn," he nodded. "And at the tower of the Two Sisters."

"Aye."

"We will wait for the guard to pass, then lower rope ladders. When sufficient men are on the wall we will take the gate. Yagi Siyan has added Moslems to my own guard. He trusts me no longer."

Wilton could find in his own heart little love for the traitor. He sat down in a chair, tried to relax. The past few hours had been trying. It had not been easy to find the Turk. Time and again he had felt the sweat cold on his body, when discovery of his identity seemed imminent. And even now every nerve in his system was acutely aware of danger. Outside this room paced a guard. Around this building were hundreds more. He was thankful that it lacked but little time of the appointed hour.

"Come," said Firuz. "We will go to the tower of the Two Sisters."

Wilton got to his feet. At the side of the Turk he left the room, his body still bent, his feet still shuffling along their way. No one stopped them. They gained the wall, climbed it, turned to the east. Here and there, as they moved along the broad top of the wall, voices challenged their progress, but always at the Turk's answer they received the command to continue on their way.

In the shadow of one of the great stone towers on the eastern wall, Firuz stopped. "This is the place," he said. "You are sure they will come?"

Wilton nodded. "They will come."

"I sent my son to Behemond only a few hours ago," Firuz muttered. "I told him to beg that Behemond make the assault tonight. Yagi Siyan watches me more closely each day."

"The gate," asked Wilton. "Where is it?"

Firuz pointed to the left. "Over there. We will first bring up as many men as we can, for the gate is well guarded and strong."

"The ropes?"

"Within the tower."

Wilton stared up at the eastern sky. It seemed to him that it was growing lighter, that the stars seemed fainter. Moving to the edge of the wall, he stared down into the shadows of the hills below it. They were heavily wooded. This was an ideal place to make a surprise attack. Under the cover of darkness and below the screen of the woods, a countless number of men could be assembled close to the walls. And if the gate were opened, nothing, he knew, could hold the Crusaders back.

A body of guards came marching down the wall, torches lighting up their progress. Firuz drew Wilton through the arched doorway of the tower and the two stood there, silent, while the guards passed. Then when they were gone, Firuz said sharply, "The ropes! And if Behemond is here, Antioch is yours."

FROM a recess in the tower Firuz took a long, coiled rope ladder. He passed it to Wilton and reached for another. Wilton hurried outside. He fastened the ladder to one of the abutments on the wall and lowered it over the side. Firuz, working near him, lowered a second ladder.

The clanking sound of armor came to Wilton from the darkness below. The rope ladder went taut. Hoarse, whispered voices reached up to him and in another moment the tall, gaunt figure of one of the Crusaders appeared clambering up the ladder. Others were following him and more were coming up the ladder Firuz had lowered.

Wilton stepped back from the edge. He tore off the Moslem gown which he had been wearing, cast the turban from his head. From his side he loosened the axe which he had brought with him. A marvelous weapon was that axe which had been

given to Wilton by his father. It was wrought entirely of steel and its handle was long and curiously marked. Above the broad cutting edge of the head was engraven the name *Bretwalda*, and above the letters were eight blood red jewels.

Though the axe looked awkward and heavy, Wilton lifted it easily to his shoulder and swung around to face the men who had clambered up the wall. Fully a score had gained the top and more were crowding up the ladders. Wilton caught sight of Richard Baliol, the Scot, of Arthur Bosworth of Essex. He saw the tall, thin-featured Robert of Normandy and near him Guy de Fortney.

Behemond scrambled over the edge of the wall, singled out Firuz and strode toward him, calling, "Where are the steps to the gate?"

Firuz hesitated. "You will need more men."

The sky had grown lighter, and now from a near-by tower there came a sudden, warning shout. It was followed by the shrill, blatant note of a trumpet. Armored Moslem soldiers poured from the tower's arched doorway, started racing forward along the wall.

Eagerly the Crusaders turned to meet them. Steel clashed against steel as the curved Moslem scimitar struck against the long two-handled sword of the Crusaders. Hoarse shouts and screams arose above the din of the battle and louder still sounded the battlecry of the Crusaders, "*Deus vult! Deus vult! God wills it!*"

Wilton threw himself into the thick of the fray, swinging the great axe *Bretwalda* with ease and dexterity. To one side of him stood Robert of Normandy and to the other Arthur Bosworth, who yelled at the top of his lungs each time he struck out with his sword.

More men were clambering up the ladders, over-anxious to join in the fight. Almost together the heavily burdened ropes snapped and a half dozen men, part way up the wall, fell back to the ground.

Wilton heard the Turk's despairing cry. Other shouts told him what had happened.

He drew back from the fight, turned to the stairs which led down from the wall to the gate. It had grown light enough now for him to see the space before the gate. Half a hundred armed men were down there, staring up at the top of the wall. They were standing motionless, stunned by the realization of what must have happened.

Wilton's eyes went swiftly from right to left. No more Crusaders were clambering over the edge of the wall. Behemond was yelling at Firuz, demanding more ropes. The Turk was shaking his head; he had no more. Fifty or sixty Crusaders had gained the top of the wall. They were not enough to storm the gate, yet this they must accomplish, for in taking it lay their only hope. Here they would be trapped and finally cut down like cattle.

"The gate!" Wilton shouted. "Follow me to the gate!"

BEHEMOND took up that cry, Richard Baliol echoed it, a score of men rushed for the stairs. Wilton heard them coming after him as he started down. A spear cast by one of the Moslems flashed past his shoulder and another narrowly missed his head. He gained the foot of the stairs, and slashing from one side to another with his great axe, he fought his way forward through the Saracens massed before the gate. Behemond was with him, Richard Baliol, de Fortney, Bosworth, Robert of Normandy, a score of others, their swords red in the gray dawn.

Wilton heard their shouts. He caught a confused impression of that desperate thrust toward the gate. He saw two Moslems fall at once from a slashing stroke of Behemond's sword. He saw Richard Baliol fighting with a grimness which took no measure of the odds. Foot by foot they pressed forward. The tip of a Moslem blade cut a thin, red line across Wilton's cheek and the man who swung that scimitar went down under the cut of *Bretwalda*. Suddenly the gate loomed up just ahead of them, defended now only by a handful of men.

"Open the gate, Wilton," Behemond called. "We will hold back the infidels. *Deus vult!*"

Bretwalda cleared the way to the gate, but the massive, wooden door was securely fastened. It shuddered under the blows and still held firm.

Wilton drew back. He swung *Bretwalda* against the heavy oak timbers and the head of the axe bit through the wood as though it had been paper. He swung the axe again, cutting through the braces across the door. The battering from the outside grew heavier and the door bulged, splintered. A loud shout tore from Wilton's lungs. Once that door was down the massed army of the Crusaders would pour into Antioch and after they were past the walls, nothing could keep them from victory. The road to Jerusalem would be open.

Once more Wilton lifted *Bretwalda*, swung it at the door. But what the result of that last blow was, Wilton did not see. A sudden, sharp pain exploded in his head and a thousand points of light danced before his eyes. He stumbled forward, stumbled into a heavy darkness which blotted out all consciousness.

Past his silent figure as the door went down came the charging army of the Crusaders. From tens of thousands of throats roared the cry, "*Deus vult!*" In the lower part of the town, before the citadel of Yagi Siyan, the Moslems formed to give them battle.

But the battle was a short one. Taken by surprise just before the hour for morning prayers, the Saracens and Turks had no organized plans for battle. Here and there groups of them made desperate stands against the Crusaders, but to no avail. And when the morning sun was bright, the Crusader's banners floated from the towers of Antioch. Only in the citadel of Yagi Siyan did the Saracens hold out.

III

WHEN Wilton of Mercia recovered consciousness, he discovered that he was lying on a couch in a narrow, high-

ceilinged room. Rich, colorful draperies covered the walls and on the floor there was a thick carpet.

For a long moment, Wilton lay without moving, his eyes turning from side to side. A steady, throbbing pain hammered in his head. His throat was dry and he was weak from hunger. Thinking required a huge effort, but he decided after a while that he must be in one of the buildings in Antioch. Since he was alive he knew that the Crusaders must have taken the city.

Behind the couch there was a rustling sound and the girl Shajar moved into the range of his vision. Wilton stared at her, blinking. "You?" he whispered hoarsely. "You? How came you here?"

Shajar knelt beside the couch. Her robe was of soft, white silk gathered at the waist by a scarlet girdle. She wore no shawl over her head and Wilton noticed that her hair was very dark and straight. A white silk veil reaching almost to her eyes was fastened by a band to her head.

"The man you call Behemond brought me here," Shajar answered. "I went to him two days ago to ask for my brother. He brought me here and said that he would send my brother to me. But he hasn't and I am afraid—"

Wilton tried to sit up, but the girl reached out suddenly and held him to the couch. She moistened a cloth and bathed his face. Relaxed, he studied the girl's eyes, but they told him nothing.

"You have cared for me?" he asked wonderingly.

"I and a man called Peter Bartholomew. He has gone now to try and find food. It is—it is very scarce. In the four days since the city was taken, all that we had has been eaten up."

Wilton lifted a hand to his head and felt of the bandage wrapped around it. That he had been unconscious for four days was hard to believe. It was also hard to understand why this girl had assisted in caring for him. He recalled her anger in the hills back of Antioch when he had tried to take her in his arms. He closed his eyes, opened them again and stared

at her. And then, hardly realizing what he was saying, he whispered, "Shajar, remove your veil. Let me see your face."

Shajar lifted her hands to the sides of her head, unfastened the veil and dropped it. Twice before had Wilton seen the girl's face. Once, clearly, in the tent of Raymond de St. Gilles, again in the half light of that night in the hills. As he stared at her he knew that he would never forget the way her dark hair framed the oval of her face, nor the way her full, warm lips were formed in a wistful smile.

"Shajar," he whispered, "why have you helped to care for me? Surely you must have known what part I played in the taking of Antioch?"

The girl bowed her head. "It was Allah's will."

"But why have you helped to care for me?"

Shajar's head was still bowed. Without looking up she said slowly, "When I came into this room you were calling my name. I knew, then, that I had been wrong in what I had thought of you. I knew then that you needed me."

"Even though I be a Christian you felt that way?"

Shajar made no answer. She did not look up, but neither did she move away. And in that moment Wilton knew that the harsh differences of creed and of country did not matter now; something infinitely larger had swept them aside. The wonder of that realization went to his head like wine. He stretched a hand toward the girl's head, whispering, "Shajar—Shajar—"

"I do not even know your name," Shajar murmured, her voice low, unsteady. "Men call you Wilton of Mercia, but—"

"It is Henry," Wilton answered. "Thus my father called me. Let me hear you say it."

"Henry." The girl was looking at him now, her face radiant. "Henry. It is a strange name."

"Not strange when you say it."

"Then listen—Henry. Close your eyes. Rest. I will stay here, be here when you awake."

Wilton did not want to close his eyes, but with Shajar's cool hand on his brow he could feel a deep peace stealing over his body, and after a while he slept.

BEHEMOND, who had called to see Wilton, stormed back and forth across the room. This was the seventh day after the fall of the city and conditions within Antioch were rapidly growing serious. The food supply was exhausted and several of the hills within the walls were in the hands of the Moslems. Outside a great Saracen army was encamped. The besiegers had become the besieged. A Byzantine army was supposed to be coming to their rescue from the north, but there had been no sign of it.

Wilton was sitting up now. The wound in his head, a deep scalp wound, was slowly mending. Peter Bartholomew had been successful in securing a little food and the presence of Shajar had made Wilton's days glorious. She sat now on a couch across the room, watching Behemond anxiously, and Wilton knew what was in her mind.

"Where is the girl's brother?" he asked Behemond.

A heavy frown came to Behemond's face. "Dead," he said bluntly.

"Dead?" Wilton gasped.

"Aye."

"But you pledged the girl—"

"I know it. The lad's death was an accident. Guy de Fortney was bringing him into the city from the camp. The lad tried to get away. One of de Fortney's men struck him down."

Wilton looked over at the girl. She did not understand Behemond's Norman speech, he knew, yet her face seemed unusually pale.

"I sent you the Saracen woman when she came to me to ask about the boy," Behemond continued. "After all, I felt that you deserved something for what you had done. And she's not a bad trick, is she?"

Wilton drew in a long breath. He fought against an impulse to smash his fist into Behemond's face. "Forget the Saracen woman," he growled.

Behemond shrugged. "All right, Wilton,

but keep her out of de Fortney's sight. De Fortney wanted her. I told him she was dead. I want no trouble between you and de Fortney. After the way he helped you hack down that door at the gate the other morning, there should be none."

"After the way he what?" Wilton demanded.

"After the way he helped you break down that door. While the rest of us held the Moslems back, de Fortney joined you at the door."

Wilton lifted a hand to his head. How that wound had come there had been puzzling him ever since he had regained consciousness. It was a blade wound. He had about decided that one of the Moslems must have broken through the line of men protecting his back, just as the door went down. But now he wondered. He had not seen de Fortney at his side while he had been smashing away at that door.

"As soon as you are well," said Behemond, "we'll want you at our council meetings. Some of these fools want to make terms with the Moslems."

Wilton nodded. He watched Behemond leave then turned his head to glance at Shajar.

She came forward, rested a hand on Wilton's shoulder and looked steadily into his eyes. "My brother is dead, isn't he?" she whispered.

Wilton could not lie. He nodded, biting his lips and wishing that he knew of some way in which he could bear part of the grief which was Shajar's lot. Her father, too, was dead, he had discovered the day before.

The girl had closed her eyes. "It is the will of Allah," he heard her murmur. "But al-Hakim was so young, so—" Her voice choked and tears squeezed between the lids of her eyes.

Wilton stood to his feet. His arms went around her and he held her tightly while she sobbed against his breast.

CONDITIONS within Antioch grew no better. Bands of Crusaders which ventured into the hills in search of food, re-

turned empty handed. Some returned not at all, having fallen prey to Moslem patrols. Each night new groups of men deserted the Crusaders' cause, slipping over the walls by means of ropes. Some of these escaped through the hills and made their way north, back over the path the Crusaders had followed. Many were trapped and slain.

Starvation and disease stalked the ranks of those who remained behind. Men faint with hunger dropped on the streets of Antioch and could not rise again. Nor were there any with the strength to haul their bodies away, and the stench of decaying flesh befouled the air. Bishop Adhemar proclaimed three days of fasting and prayer, and there were those among the Crusaders who laughed when they heard his order, for what man among them was not already fasting?

Wilton attended the meetings of the council, but these accomplished nothing. The Crusaders were too weak, too few, to risk attacking the army outside the gates. They could only look forward to the time when Alexius Comneus, the Byzantine ruler, would arrive with his army.

Guy de Fortney was at the third council meeting which Wilton attended, and as Wilton came into the room he saw de Fortney's eyes lift toward his bandaged head. A thin smile touched Wilton's lips. He said nothing then, but when the council meeting was ended he crossed over to where de Fortney stood and said slowly, "I understand that I am indebted to you for help at the gate."

Guy de Fortney's pale eyes narrowed. He stood almost as tall as Wilton and was fully as heavy. He did not have the look of a man who had been without food. His cheeks were not sunken and there were greasy stains on his mantle.

"I did help you," he answered bluntly. "But for me that gate would never have been broken down. Your axe had slipped from your hands, had laid open your head. You—"

Wilton laughed. "You should learn to use your sword better, de Fortney," he said

harshly. "When we reach Jerusalem I will undertake to give you a lesson."

"Why not now?" de Fortney sneered, his hand going to the blade at his side.

Wilton shrugged. He turned to Beliol who stood near by and said sharply, "Loan me your blade, Richard."

Behemond pushed forward, his face flushed with anger. "I will have no fights between my men," he shouted. "De Fortney, put up your blade."

De Fortney laughed and turned away. "We will settle this later, Wilton," he promised.

Wilton made no reply. He left the council room and walked back to his own quarters. Shajar met him at the door and came to his arms with a naturalness which always affected him strangely. He would never, he thought, get over the wonder of their love for each other. He seemed to have known Shajar always, for she was as much a part of him as his own right arm. And sometimes that feeling was frightening, when he thought of what his life would be like if he should lose her.

"What have you been doing while I have been gone?" Wilton asked, smiling.

"Waiting for you."

PETER BARTHOLOMEW came through the doorway. He was a tall, pale youth with wide, blue eyes and long, shaggy hair. "I have had a vision," he cried to Wilton. "In my dreams St. Andrew came to me. He told me—"

Wilton shook his head "Wait a minute, Peter. I don't feel up to listening to another one of your visions. Take it to someone else."

"But St. Andrew—"

"Go and tell the bishop."

Peter blinked. He seemed mightily crestfallen, but without another word he turned away.

"What had he to say?" Shajar asked.

"Nothing important. He wanted to tell me of a vision but right now I am interested only in you, Shajar, and in the army of Alexius."

Shajar frowned. "The Byzantine army."

"Yes."

"It has turned back, Henry. It will not come to Antioch."

"It has turned back? How have you heard that?"

"This morning I saw an Armenian woman I know quite well. I am part Armenian, you know, and I am accepted by them. This woman told me what I have just told you. Word was carried to their leader that all the Crusaders had been slain. This woman's husband saw them turn and start back north."

It didn't occur to Wilton to doubt the story Shajar had just told him. For several days he had been of the opinion that they could expect no help from the north. If he had been coming, Alexius Comnenus should have arrived long ago. Yet he had clung to the hope that he was wrong, clung to it desperately.

"It means the end, doesn't it?" Shajar whispered.

Wilton nodded. It meant the end. Outside the walls of Antioch the Moslem host commanded by Kerbogha awaited. They might easily have stormed and retaken the city but they seemed to prefer to watch the Crusaders starve. Only a miracle, Wilton knew, could save them. His eyes rested on Shajar and he made himself smile. "Will you do something for me, Shajar?"

"Anything, Henry."

"I want you to take a message to Kerbogha, the Moslem leader. I want you to take it tonight. I will let you over the wall with ropes. You can reach him easily. The message is very important."

Shajar looked at him steadily, her eyes probing his. Wilton held the smile on his lips. He said lightly, "Then you can come back of course, if you want to."

Shajar shook her head. "You must not send me away, Henry."

"But this message—"

"There is no message. You know that if the daughter of Yagi Siyan were sent to the Moslem camp she could never return here."

Wilton shrugged. He felt little surprise that Shajar had guessed his purpose,

though he had tried as well as possible to conceal it. Nevertheless he knew that he must send her away. Death hovered over all who remained in Antioch.

He crossed to the couch, sat down, leaned back against its cushions and Shajar came to his side. "Talk of yourself," he commanded her. "Tell me of your life before we came. Tell me what you did."

Shajar smiled. She began talking of her girlhood and while she talked Wilton planned what he must do. His lips became a thin, straight line, and his heart was like a piece of ice within his chest.

IV

THE rope was long and strong and its price was a hundred *dinars*. The Syrian who offered it for sale squinted knowingly at Wilton. He had little doubt as to its intended use. Men were still going over the wall each night, staking their lives and a chance for freedom against death in Antioch by starvation or at the hands of Kerbogha's patrols.

"Know you the way to Kerbogha's tent?" Wilton asked.

The Syrian blinked, nodded.

"And for another hundred *dinars* would you wait below the wall tonight and take to Kerbogha the woman I will lower to you?"

"A woman?"

"Yes. A woman for whom Kerbogha will pay a princely sum."

The Syrian hesitated but the thought of two hundred *dinars* and the promise of an additional reward overcame any scruples he might have had. The deal was made and details were discussed. Wilton paid the man two hundred *dinars*, took the rope and secreted it near the wall. He had no fear that Shajar would come to harm at the Syrian's hands. He had picked his man carefully. The Syrian, he knew, would deliver her to Kerbogha, and once she was there, Kerbogha would see that the daughter of Yagi Siyan came to no harm.

Wilton went back through the streets of Antioch. It was just growing dark and

three hours remained before the time appointed for lowering Shajar over the wall. An almost irresistible impulse urged him toward his quarters. But he dare not go there, for Shajar, he knew, would be waiting for him and in her arms he might weaken.

The streets were thronged with people, Crusaders in their armor, pilgrims, priests. Here and there were even a few of the women who had followed them from Europe. Gaunt and haggard were their faces. Some of them seemed near to death. Wilton stared at them, blankly, wondering what their eventual fate would be. Many of them, he guessed, would die. Those who would live faced slavery.

Some man grasped him by the shoulder and cried, "Have you heard it also? Is it true? Is it really true?"

"Is what true?" Wilton asked.

"That the lance which pierced the side of the blessed Savior has been found?"

Wilton looked at the man stupidly.

"What folly is this?" he demanded.

"No folly," shouted another voice. "It has been found. I have seen it. This hand," and the man lifted his right hand into the air, "this hand has touched it."

More people crowded around, shouting questions. They seemed caught in the grip of a surging emotion. Pale and thin their faces may have been, but in their eyes there was an ecstatic light.

"Tell us of it," cried an old, white-bearded man. "Is it truly the lance?"

Still holding his hand high in the air, the man who claimed to have touched the lance, shouted, "It was found in the church of St. Peter which the infidels had made into a mosque. It was buried deep under the altar. Its hiding place was revealed in a vision to Peter Bartholomew. It was Peter Bartholomew himself who drew it from the hole which men had been digging all day. I have seen it, touched it. It is the lance."

A great shout went up from the crowd and here and there men dropped on their knees and began to pray. Others turned in the direction of St. Peter's church.

WILTON moved away, thinking of Peter Bartholomew and his visions. He had little faith in the youth, but he was suddenly glad for what had happened. From the scene in the street, the finding of this lance or whatever it was, would give the Crusaders and pilgrims something to take their minds off of their suffering.

Where he walked during the next two hours, Wilton was never to know. Occasionally he was conscious of shouting crowds, of throngs of people, occasionally he knew that he stood alone on narrow, deserted, side streets. In him there was a deep bitterness which he could not overcome. Death he had never feared, and even now he had no fear of death itself. Yet life had suddenly become precious to him.

Turning finally toward his own quarters, Wilton found himself hurrying, though there was still an hour before the appointed time. His breath was coming in swift gasps as he reached the door, and for a moment he waited, striving to regain his composure. Out in the street crowds of people were still milling around, but Wilton was not conscious of them. His thoughts turned suddenly to the axe *Bretwalda* and to a legend concerning it. To the holder of that axe, so the legend went, would come "a great sorrow and a great joy, a great victory and a great defeat." His lips tightened and he made himself smile. Then he opened the door and stepped inside.

"I was worried about you," Shajar greeted him.

"Worried?"

"Yes. You were gone so long and there have been such crowds in the streets, and there has been so much shouting."

Wilton chuckled. "And our Peter is responsible for it. He has found, so it seems, the lance which pierced the side of our Savior as he hung on the cross."

Shajar unbuckled Wilton's sword belt and laid the blade on a table. She took his helmet, led him over to the couch. "Is our Peter really responsible?"

It suddenly occurred to Wilton that this discovery of the lance could be used

to get Shajar out of the house and to a place near the wall. There he could bind her, carry her to the wall and lower her to the waiting Syrian. She would not go willingly, he knew.

"Would you not like to see the place where the lance was discovered?" he asked her.

"Tonight?"

"Aye. It would be an interesting sight."

"But—"

A loud banging on the door interrupted the girl. Wilton came to his feet, but before he could move forward the door burst open and three men strode into the room. Leading them was Guy de Fortney, a naked blade in his hand. At the sight of the girl his eyes brightened. "So the man was right," he said. "It is here that she has been kept."

Wilton's eyes narrowed. "What do you want, de Fortney? Why have you come here?"

Guy de Fortney laughed. "I have come for the Saracen woman. Stand away from her, Wilton. I have little time to spare. She is the daughter of Yagi Siyan and the man who holds her can bargain with the Moslems for his freedom."

How de Fortney had learned that Shajar was here Wilton didn't know, but there were many who might have told him. Without doubt, he could bargain with the Moslems for his freedom if he held her, and in de Fortney's eyes there was a look of desperation. He realized that only death awaited the Crusaders who stayed in Antioch.

"Stand away from her, Wilton," de Fortney cried again.

Shajar had come to her feet. She was clutching Wilton's arm. His eyes moved over to the table where his sword lay. It was more than three paces from where he stood. The axe *Bretwalda* hung on the other wall. He was unarmed and he knew that he could reach neither weapon before de Fortney struck him down.

"Do you not think I have tried to deal with Kerbogha?" he asked slowly. "'Tis no use. The Moslems—"

Guy de Fortney moved forward. "Wilton," he said savagely. "You told me once that I should learn to use this blade. It missed once. It will not miss this time."

AS HE faced the man, Wilton was conscious of no fear. He was aware only of the breathlessness of that moment. His eyes were fastened on de Fortney's. In another instant, he knew, de Fortney would swing that sword at him. Could he but escape that first slash he might be able to reach his axe before de Fortney or the other two men could strike again. There was no other chance for him. He loosened Shajar's hands from his arm, pushed her away. His muscles tightened.

A high, nervous laugh came from de Fortney's throat. His eyes widened. The blade in his hands whipped suddenly into the air, started downward. Instinctively, Wilton threw himself to one side, and then a sharp cry of horror burst from his lips.

"No. Shajar! No!" he screamed. "No—" His hands went out to clutch the girl's body as she threw herself between him and the flashing blade. But though he touched her he could not stop her. The blade came down. It sheered deep into the girl's shoulder and warm, red blood burst like a fountain from the cut. A brief, piteous cry sounded from her lips, and then as de Fortney drew back she slumped to the floor and lay motionless.

Wilton had no clear recollection of stumbling over to the wall where hung the axe *Bretwalda*, but he suddenly knew that he held it in his hands and that he was facing de Fortney and the two men. There was a stunned, bewildered expression on de Fortney's face. The other two looked frightened.

Whether he said anything or not, Wilton never knew. He moved forward, slashed out with the axe again and again. Swords cut at him, but they were as useless as straws, and one after another those three men went down, de Fortney last, with a wild screaming cry, to meet the death he had hoped to avoid.

But there was little satisfaction for

Wilton in the death of those three men. He lowered the axe and went swiftly to where Shajar lay. Her shoulder was almost severed from her body and the carpet around her was soaking up her blood.

Wilton dropped to his knees. He lifted her in his arms, stared into her face. Tears blinded him until he could not see. His head dropped to her breast; he whispered her name over and over, "Shajar—Shajar Shajar—"

"Henry."

The whisper was so faint that he hardly caught it. He raised his head, looked into her eyes. They had opened, were resting on his face. Shajar's lips moved and as though from a great distance away, Wilton heard her saying, "Do not grieve, Henry. We have known more happiness in a few days than many people know in an entire lifetime."

"Shajar," Wilton whispered. "Shajar—"

The girl's figure relaxed in his arms. Her eyes closed. Wilton bent forward and kissed her and when he lifted his head he saw that there was a smile on her lips.

PEOPLE were still milling through the streets of Antioch in the gray dawn of the early morning. Before the church of St. Peter there was a great throng and on its steps stood Bishop Adhemar. He held in his hands the rusty blade of a lance which Peter Bartholomew had discovered buried beneath the church's altar. All night long had Bishop Adhemar stood there holding the lance while countless thousands of crusaders and pilgrims filed past him, stopping only to make the sign of the cross and to kiss the lance.

But then, though they moved on, none of them returned to their quarters. A religious frenzy had gripped them. They were massed in groups throughout the entire town. Here and there crowds of pilgrims knelt in prayer, here and there priests were exhorting great congregations. "It is the sign," men whispered. "It is the sign for which we have been waiting. The Byzantine army will come. Victory will be ours. *Deus vult!*"

Hunger was forgotten and men who were so weak that they could scarcely stand moved through the streets borne up by a nervous strength newly found. Peter the Hermit, who was unsurpassed in eloquence, had talked until he was hoarse. Behemond, Tancred, Robert of Normandy and other leaders forgot their fears. The discovery of the lance was a sign that the Lord was still with them. Hope was born anew. . . .

Such were the scenes which met Wilton's eyes as he closed the door on the room where lay the body of Shajar. All night he had kept watch at her side, conscious of no other thoughts but of her. And gradually and very strangely a deep and quiet peace had calmed his nerves and brought order to the confusion of his mind. Shajar's love and devotion was as a mantle which covered him completely and which set him apart from all other men. It was a precious possession which he would never lose, and which would forever lift him above his companions.

As he moved down into the street and made his way through the crowd he heard on every hand the story of the finding of the lance. Over and over he heard men saying, "It is a sign. The Byzantine army is coming. The Byzantine army is coming."

Near the church of St. Peter, Wilton suddenly stopped, recalling an old story that he heard in England. Back in the year 1000, according to the story, men had expected the Second Coming of Christ and the Millennium. No crops had been planted that year, no work had been done. And on Christmas day, thousands had gathered at the churches to await His Coming. But He had not come. And the bitterness and disappointment which had followed had been so horrible that Christianity had almost perished from the face of the earth.

Remembering that story, Wilton knew what these companions of his were facing. For despite the sign of the lance, the Byzantine army was *not* coming. It had turned back. There was no hope for any of them, and in a day or two when this re-

ligious fervor had passed, starvation and weakness would take its dreadful toll; bitterness and disappointment would make a horror of the remaining days before the Moslems stormed the walls. It would be better, Wilton thought, to seek death on the field of battle than to wait supinely for such an end. It would be better to let the Moslems once more feel the cut of Christian blades, even if they were swung by weakened arms, than to await a cowardly death.

A tall, gaunt warrior grasped him by the shoulder, shouting, "The Byzantine army is coming. We will be victorious. We shall yet reach the Holy City."

Wilton smiled. "Why wait for the Byzantine army?"

The man blinked at him. "What do you mean?"

"If the Lord is with us, and the lance is a sign, how can we fail of victory if we attack the infidel?" Wilton asked.

The warrior's shoulder's straightened. "Aye. How can we fail?"

Wilton moved on. To another and to another he asked the same question. "Why wait for the Byzantine army? Why wait for the Byzantine army?" He passed beyond the church, turned down another street, and echoes of that question reached him as he moved on. The thought took hold on the Crusaders' minds. It fitted in with the discovery of the lance. A sign had been given to them, a sign of victory. Swords gleamed in the morning air, axes flashed in the first rays of the sun. The crowds stopped milling about, turned toward the city's gates, shouting, crying, laughing, borne on by an excitement and fervor which stopped not to measure the odds against them.

TO THE tent of Kerbogha, the leader of the Moslem army camped outside the walls of Antioch, came word that the Christians were moving out through the gates of the city and forming in a battle line. Kerbogha laughed. From his spies within the city walls he knew the conditions which the Crusaders had faced.

He knew that they had been without food, that disease and death had stalked through their ranks, that their spirit was exhausted.

"It cannot be true," he insisted.

"But it is true," replied the messenger. "Many of the Christians have already crossed the river."

Kerbogha left his tent and saw that the Christians had indeed moved out of the city and were forming for battle. He saw, too, that most of them were on foot, that only a few had horses. And once more he laughed. A seasoned campaigner was this Moslem leader and under his banners he had the greatest Moslem force which had been assembled for years. He had horses for all his men, and all were well armed. It would be easy to defeat that straggling Christian mob.

"Have our men withdraw a distance of two miles," he ordered. "We will let the Christians walk to their death—as many as can walk."

Desperately and earnestly did Behemond, Tancred, Godfrey de Bouillon and Robert of Normandy try to form the Crusaders' ranks into some kind of battle order, but as the Christians started forward, there was little of promise in their advance. To one side, Peter the Hermit led his following of pilgrims, some of them were not armed at all, many of whom were almost too weak to follow him. Before another body of men marched Bishop Adhemar, his standard a cross and fastened to it, the rusty lance which Bartholomew had found. In the center of the long line were the Crusaders, well armored, well armed. Lance, sword, axe and shield they bore, and if the weight of their armor was heavy to their weakened bodies, they did not show it. As the Moslems drew back, to many of them it seemed an advance sign of victory and the retreat was greeted with a shout.

Men started running forward across the plain, waving sword and shield and shouting, "*Deus vult! Deus vult!*" The battle

line lost all semblance of order. Dust churned up by their racing feet spread behind them like a cloud, hiding the walls of Antioch from their sight. Here and there someone would stumble and fall, perhaps rise again, perhaps not.

Wilton ran with the others, and despite his knowledge of what lay ahead for all of them, a strange enthusiasm gripped him. He saw no ultimate victory, thought not of defeat, but in the cries around him he sensed a spirit which was greater than any force of arms.

"*Deus vult! Deus vult!*"

BEFORE him, suddenly, was the Moslem line. To the right and to the left lances pricked the sides of the Arab horses, riders were unseated and rearing, screaming stallions spread confusion through the Moslem ranks. Wilton continued moving forward, now and again slashing out with his great axe. A little way ahead the Moslems were forming on foot. Behind soldiers armored with shield and lance were file upon file of archers and bowmen. Beyond them were mounted regiments of Seljuk Turks, and now from the right and left in great flanking movements came thundering Arab horsemen, cutting into the pilgrims' ranks, riding them to the earth and moving on until finally stopped by the pressure of bodies around their horses.

Wilton ran forward, charging against that Moslem line. The axe *Bretwalda*, slashing from side to side, cut a wide pathway for him. Other Crusaders, following him, widened that pathway and made of it a wedge, ever broadening, ever moving forward. Nothing, it seemed, could stem their advance, nothing could stand against them. The Moslem lines broke under the fury of Christian sword and axe. Hastily re-formed, it was broken again. Panic spread through their ranks and men turned to flee. Crusaders caught up riderless horses and pursued the Moslems. The flight became a rout, and as the dust settled over the plains the weary Crusaders gathered at what had been Kerbogha's camp. There

they found food in plenty. There they feasted that night, talking in low tones of the battle and now and then glancing reverently at Adhemar's standard, the cross with the rusted lance.

"A miracle," some whispered. And it had been a miracle. Few there were who realized it, but that day, not only had the Crusaders defeated a force many times greater than theirs in number, but also they had completely broken the resistance of the Moslems. For a while, as they marched on to Jerusalem, they were to be delayed at Maara-en-N'aman. On a few more occasions they were to have sharp engagements with bands of Turks or Saracens. The road to Jerusalem however, was open. . . .

Seated not far from the standard of Bishop Adhemar, Wilton of Mercia looked up at it thoughtfully. He had come through the battle unscathed, a battle which he had thought none of them would survive. And now he would follow that standard on to Jerusalem and when the Holy City had been taken he would return to England. All of that he could see clearly before him. It was the way his life must run.

Behemond joined him and looking up at the standard, said thoughtfully, "It's strange, isn't it, Wilton, how so old and rusty a thing as that lance can change the course of history? With twice as many men as we had, all in good condition, I would have hesitated to attack the Moslems. I even tried to turn our men back but could

not stop them. Now nothing can stand in our way."

Wilton smiled. "*Deus vult*," he murmured.

For a while Behemond was silent, then he said suddenly, "I do not go on, Wilton. I stay here to hold Antioch. I would like to have you with me and I thought, perhaps—"

"Nay, Behemond," Wilton answered. "I must go on. Yet I think that a part of me will always be in Antioch."

"A part of you? I do not understand?"

Wilton closed his eyes and to his mind there came the vision of Shajar's face. He could see her as clearly as though she stood before him. It would not always be thus, he knew. With time that vision would fade, would grow indistinct, but his memory of her would stay forever fresh. Yes, truly, a part of him would never leave Antioch.

Rather annoyed at his continued silence, Behemond got to his feet and said gruffly, "Well, think it over, Wilton. And if you decide to stay—"

Men were gathering around the standard of Bishop Adhemar. Someone had started a song of victory. Wilton stood up, facing resolutely toward Jerusalem. His hand closed on the axe *Bretwalda* and he lifted it, examined it. One of the jewels was missing from the head. He shrugged. That was of little importance. It was a great weapon. He moved the axe to his shoulder and started walking back to the city.

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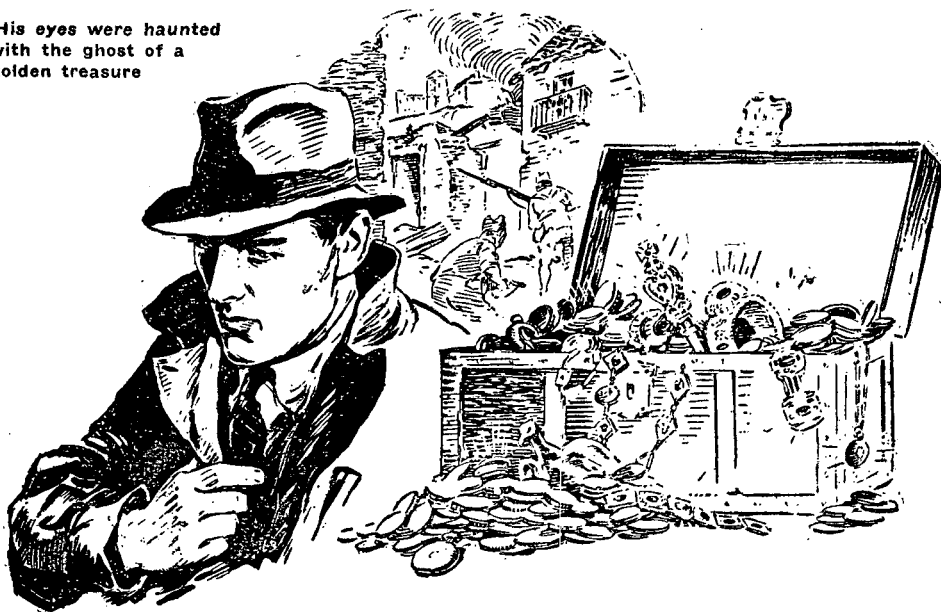
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(ADV.)

His eyes were haunted
with the ghost of a
golden treasure



The Man from Madrid

Though the four American privateers felt that it was from the grave that he returned, he came only from war-torn Spain. His look, as he faced them, was a madman's; but his voice was coldly sane, saying: "I have to get even: Life's no good to me if I can't get even for what you did to me. . . ." Beginning an exciting and distinctive novel of a modern Eldorado and the battle that raged for its possession

By **WALTER RIPPERGER**

Author of "This Doll Must Die," "The Masked Marvel," etc.

CHAPTER I

"I HAVE TO GET EVEN"

IT WAS late afternoon when the man got off the subway at 68th Street and headed east. He was tall and spare and his clothes were worn and rumpled. He limped slightly and carried a Malacca cane. Only by studying the lean, gaunt face did it become apparent that he was really quite young; that the lines in his face were lines of suffering, of grim determination, and not of age.

His mouth was sensitive, his chin strong; and there was a curious expression in his gray eyes. They were sad, yet beneath the sadness, some of the iron in the man's soul showed. You would look at him twice, and you would feel pity. And you would be a little frightened too.

Number 362A was a small brownstone house. It had a tiny grass plot and a dwarfed tree that waged a losing battle for sunlight and life.

The man went up the steps slowly, methodically, limping. He rang the bell and presently the door was opened.

"Yes?" said a sallow-faced butler.

"I'd like to see Mr. Gabriel."

"This way please." He led the way down

a short thickly-carpeted hall, drew back a door and motioned the man with the limp to enter.

The man found himself in a dark musty parlor. The furniture was worn to shabbiness. And the rust-brown draperies at the front windows were drawn. The butler pressed a switch and lit the old-fashioned chandelier overhead. Then he left, softly.

The man with the limp sat down. After a while the door opened. The man turned his lean face and discovered that it wasn't Mr. Gabriel. It was a tall, slim girl with soft brown hair and wide, intelligent dark eyes. The man with the limp stood up.

"My uncle," the girl said, "is not here but he ought to be back from the office soon, though of course I can't be sure."

"Perhaps I'd come back." He took a few steps, hesitated.

"Is there anything I can do?" the girl asked.

For some reason that puzzled her, a wave of sympathy came over her. It couldn't be just because he limped. It couldn't be because of the sadness in his eyes because it was an impersonal sort of sadness, not concerned with himself. She frowned and looked away, almost resentfully.

"I'll be back later," he said.

"Who shall I say called?"

A faint, mirthless smile hovered for a brief instant on the man's lips. "Tell Mr. Gabriel . . . the man from Madrid."

THE girl started slightly. "From Madrid?" she said hesitantly. "You've been in the war?" Her eyes dropped from the scar high up on his left cheek to his right leg. Then quickly: "Forgive me. I had no business—" She stopped, confused.

"Yes. From the beginning," he said with a sort of leaden listlessness. He spoke without looking at her, as though he were reviewing out loud something that was passing through his mind.

"You're not Spanish?" she said, without meaning to be rude.

"With the Abraham Lincoln Brigade," he said shortly.

"My uncle," she said, "was in Madrid part of the time. He wasn't in the army. He was in business."

"Yes, I know," the man said, and again that mirthless little smile passed across his lips. He took a few more steps towards the door.

"It's cold in here," the girl said. "I could have Donaldson light a fire and you could wait."

He looked at her briefly and shook his head.

"If I tell my uncle that the man from Madrid called, will he know? I mean there must be a great many people who would fit that description. My uncle was in Madrid for so many years, even before—I am Diana Lee." She blushed a little, which was strange, because she wasn't given to blushing.

"It doesn't matter. I'll be back."

She held the door open for him and it was then that the sound of a key turning in the front door became audible.

The man from Madrid stopped. It seemed to her that he stiffened a little, then he walked back into the room and stood by the fireplace. Diana stepped into the hall.

"There's someone here to see you, Uncle George," she said.

Mr. Gabriel nodded, took off his hat and coat and dropped them on a chair in the hall. He was about fifty, of medium height, with graying hair and nervous, blue eyes. His features were round, regular, and soft.

He started into the room briskly, then stopped as though suddenly frozen to the ground.

The man from Madrid stood still by the mantel, every inch of him rigid. Twice, George Gabriel tried to say something and failed.

"Graham!" Gabriel said at last in a tone scarcely audible, "Don Graham!"

The man from Madrid, Don Graham, said nothing.

"I thought—I thought you were dead."

Don Graham nodded slowly. "Yes, I know," he said. "I didn't die though."

Gabriel stood there swaying; the color had gone out of his face.

"What—what do you want?" he managed at last.

"You know what I want."

"You mean you want a cut?" Gabriel asked eagerly.

"No. All of it. I would have been here sooner—but they locked me up and it took me a long time to get well. When they were convinced it wasn't my fault they let me go—sent me here. I've got my strength back—most of it—as far as my body is concerned. I'm not so sure about my mind."

Diana shivered and knew that she was suddenly afraid.

"It was all a mistake," George Gabriel said. He kept wetting his lips. "And besides it was war, and you know what war is like. The ordinary—the ordinary rules of the game don't apply. You do things you wouldn't ordinarily, wouldn't dream of doing." He went on a little faster. "If there is anything I—we can do to make it up to you— It was all a mistake— I mean you being—" He ended lamely.

"I'm not so sure about my mind," Don Graham said, his voice gone harsh, "but I think it's all right. . . . I've come back, Mr. Gabriel, because I'm human and want to get even. Maybe you don't understand but I have to get even. Have to," he muttered and beat his fists together.

MR. GABRIEL licked his thick lips. "I don't blame you for feeling the way you do," he said, "but don't forget it was war. Don't forget how much we had at stake; don't forget we have our sympathies, too. Men like you are idealists. You fight for a cause, but men like myself, like McLaughlin and Zimmerman—we've got ideals that we fight for."

For a moment. Don Graham looked nonplussed. "When did you fight and where?" he asked.

"We fight the best way we can," Mr. Gabriel said. "We're not so young, but we fight with what we've got—" He didn't look like a fighter.

"Yes," Don Graham broke in, in a tone that was indescribably hard, "you fight with money, with sabotage, with torture, with intrigue, spies . . . and in the end you steal."

Again Mr. Gabriel licked his lips. "What is it you want? If it's money, we've got it—lots of it. I can see where you want to be paid for—That's fair. Yes. Fair. McLaughlin and Zimmerman and the others—they'll see that. You've got nothing to worry about. You're fixed for life."

"That's right," Don Graham said. "I'm fixed for life." And again he laughed his strident laugh.

Diana Lee was more afraid than she had ever been in her whole life. She had to stop this. "Please don't, Mr. Graham." She did her best to keep her voice even. She meant: Please don't laugh in that terrible way. Please . . .

Don Graham looked at her as though seeing her for the first time. He said nothing. He picked up his hat from the chair into which he had flung it, and pulled it down over his dark unruly hair. He paused at the door.

"You must give it back," he said, "the works of art, the chalices, the gold—every cent of it."

George Gabriel felt his body twitch. He remembered this man from Madrid, and knew him for what he was. Long before he had met him, he had heard of him. His fame had reached every corner of Spain and beyond. It was he, more than anyone else, who had stemmed Franco's early advance in the University City sector. It was Don Graham who was entrusted by the Loyalist commanders with the most dangerous missions. It was he who could never be beaten no matter how incredible the odds; and it was he who, when Zimmerman and the others had finally trapped and tortured him, wouldn't give in. True, they had made him cry out and weep and rage but they hadn't broken his courage; his cries were physical, only from his body, and had no meaning.

They got nothing out of him—nothing after twenty-four endless hours, and they

had left him on a road for dead. If it hadn't been for that other, that little man who couldn't stand pain the way Graham could, the whole thing would have failed.

And here was Graham saying he was going to get even and wanted all that treasure back, every cent of it. He was mad. That made him all the more dangerous.

"Be reasonable," Mr. Gabriel said a little hoarsely. "You're through with the war. It's over for you. We'll see that you get your share."

"I want it all," Don Graham said.

"You can't expect that," Mr. Gabriel said, then, grasping at a straw, "Besides, it isn't ours. We didn't take it for ourselves. It's for the Rebels, the Nationalists. We're using it for them."

Don Graham said: "You're a liar. I know that. I'd respect you if it was the way you said, but it isn't. Your gang pretended to be members of the Fifth Column—those inside Madrid trying to help Franco on the outside. But you weren't, really. You were crooks who used the Fifth Column so that you could steal a treasure worth five million dollars."

Both men had forgotten Diana. They were so intent on each other that they didn't know that she was there, listening, watching, wide-eyed.

Gabriel swallowed a couple of times. He ran the back of his hand across his moist forehead. What was there to be afraid of? Graham couldn't *do* anything. Not here. This was the United States, and he and Zimmerman and McLaughlin were all right—safe.

"This really isn't up to me," Gabriel said. "Fritz Zimmerman is the one to see. It was his show. Not mine."

"I know," Graham said. "I thought I'd see you little dogs first before I tackled Zimmerman."

"I resent that. The reason Zimmerman is handling this is because he's an exporter. He's using that treasure to buy supplies for Franco's last push."

Don Graham half closed his eyes. "What a liar you are!" he said wearily.

Gabriel's face grew red. He took two quick steps, his fists clenched. Graham didn't budge. Gabriel mumbled something about that if it weren't for Graham's being a cripple . . . Don Graham's face went white, but when he spoke his voice was even, almost soft.

"If I wasn't crippled, I wouldn't be here."

"Uncle George!" Diana cried out. She turned swiftly to Graham and for a fleeting instant her hand rested lightly on his arm. "Please go. Please."

He turned slowly and stared at her. His eyes grew suddenly bleak. "You're sorry for me, aren't you?" he said tonelessly. Then he nodded. "I keep forgetting. All the rest of my life people are going to be sorry for me."

He was halfway through the door, on his way out, when he paused. "In case you want to find me, this is where I live." He tore out a page of a small notebook, scribbled something on it, came back into the room, tossed the slip onto the table, then he walked out.

CHAPTER II

WAR IS NOT FUN

IT WAS late in November and nearly dark. There was rain or snow in the air. At the corner he paused; deftly, with one hand, he rolled himself a cigarette. Then he walked south.

His boarding house was on 46th Street, just east of 3rd Avenue. It was more than a mile away, but he didn't take a cab, because he had so little money, and that would have to last for weeks, maybe longer. And there was José who had even less than he had.

Besides, he liked to walk. It was a gesture of defiance. What was a limp to him?

As he walked, he thought. A thousand schemes sped through his mind. That interview with Gabriel had been about what he had expected, except that he hadn't been prepared for that girl. Why hadn't Gabriel sent her from the room?

Perhaps Gabriel had been afraid to stay with him alone. Conscience makes a coward. Yes, he would remember that.

The task he had set himself was incredibly difficult. There were Gabriel, McLaughlin, and Meechling—and they were perhaps not so formidable. But there was Fritz Zimmerman too. It was more than a year now, but he could still see Fritz Zimmerman standing there, watching the inhuman things they were doing to him, and laughing! And it was Zimmerman who had suggested the worse things to do to little José—and very effective those things had been, for in the end poor little José had talked, had betrayed Graham and his comrades and them all.

Graham didn't blame José. He had stood up under all that torture for hours with remarkable fortitude. And there is a limit to what a man can endure. There were some things that even he, Don Graham, couldn't endure. That girl, for instance, that niece of Gabriel's, feeling sorry for him because he was crippled . . .

Graham looked up at the lamppost. He had been so absorbed that he had walked past his corner. He was at 29th Street. He turned and started back, and then the rain came. Suddenly, unexpectedly, cold, driving, slashing rain. Don Graham turned up the collar of his trenchcoat and looked about for a doorway or something that might afford him shelter. He hurried on and suddenly came upon a dilapidated three-story building that had a double store on the ground floor, and through the dusty panes Don Graham could see people inside, a meeting of some sort. He looked at the window and saw that it was a mission.

WELDON'S ROCK OF AGES MISSION

Graham stepped inside and found himself at the back of a dingy, smelly room. Dim lamplight washed down on hopeless, beaten faces, mostly old men and old women. There was a man on the platform preaching about salvation and the hope that lay in God. Somebody came silently and gave Graham a chair.

He tried to listen but his mind wandered and finally came to rest on the preacher himself. He was tall and incredibly thin, and his black suit, shiny and baggy at the knees, hung loosely on him. He talked with vigor, earnestly and with seeming sincerity, in a peculiar rasping cracked voice, without inflection or variety in his sentence structure. It was obviously a sermon that he had delivered many times before. Presently he finished and walked to a little organ. He started to play and sing. His little flock joined in "Rock of Ages."

He could have been mistaken, but Graham thought that when some of the men came to the "Let me hide myself in thee," they sang it with peculiar gusto, as if the phrase had a special meaning for them.

The meeting came to an end. It was still raining, though not as hard as before. Graham, wondering how soon the rain would let up, felt a tap on the shoulder. The man who had presided and played the organ was standing by his elbow, smiling.

"I am Mr. Nibbs," the man said. "I run this mission for Mr. Weldon who founded it."

"That's nice," Don Graham said without interest.

"It's nice for *some* of these people," Mr. Nibbs whispered.

GRAHAM stared. There seemed to be some hidden meaning back of Mr. Nibbs' words. Once more Graham's eyes took in the gathering and now it struck him that there were a few, perhaps a half a dozen or so who were dressed pretty well. There were men, young men mostly, with hard, expressionless faces, men who had an air of assurance, a vague grim attitude that now that Don Graham came to notice it, stood out with astonishing clarity. Were these the men to whom Mr. Nibbs had referred when he said it was nice for "some" of them? Were they the men whose voices had risen high, forcefully, singing, "Let me hide myself in thee?"

"Perhaps it would be to your advantage," Mr. Nibbs was saying, "for you to tell me your troubles. My mission in life is to help people that need it. You're a strong man but you need help. I saw that the minute you came in."

Graham shook his head. "Thanks," he said shortly. "I can take care of myself."

"It's no sign of weakness," Mr. Nibbs persisted, "to seek help. Sometimes the forces arrayed against one are too great, too vast, too malign. It is brotherly love that I preach and brotherly love that I practice."

Graham showed no signs of yielding.

"At least," Mr. Nibbs continued, "while it is raining, come and sit with me in my office. I should like to tell you about my work."

Don Graham shrugged and Mr. Nibbs led the way down the aisle, up onto the platform and through a curtain at the rear. The office was a small musty room. There was a little desk, a faded carpet, a few chairs, and a coal stove where a fire burned dully. Besides these, there was one other article of furniture, somehow incongruous amidst the rest—a very large and very modern safe. Mr. Nibbs sat down at his desk, indicating a chair. For the first time Graham got a good look at Mr. Nibbs' face.

It was a weird face, narrow and seemed to have two distinct, totally different sides to it. That effect was due to Mr. Nibbs' eyes. Mr. Nibbs had only one good eye. The other was glass. It gave his face a certain Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde quality.

"I mentioned before," said Mr. Nibbs, "that my mission in life is to help people, brothers in distress. By that, sir— By the way, what is your name?"

"Graham—Don Graham."

"By that, Brother Graham, I wasn't referring solely to spiritual aid, though that of course is of the utmost importance." Mr. Nibbs' good eye went up towards the ceiling, while his glass one remained rigid, producing a very odd effect. His entire body even seemed for a second lopsided. "I meant *material* help as well.

You would be surprised, Brother Graham, how helpful I can, on occasion, be."

Don Graham was surprised.

"You see, I am not alone," Mr. Nibbs went on ever more softly. "I have several very capable, shall I say, lieutenants?"

Don Graham gazed at him moodily.

"Very capable lieutenants," Mr. Nibbs repeated dreamily, "men who live here, and who for one reason or another have found it advantageous to dissociate themselves temporarily at least from worldly affairs. In the old days these men perhaps would have sought a haven in a monastery. Today they come to Brother Nibbs where they receive food and clothes and everything that they need in return for which they are always glad to render such services as they can." Mr. Nibbs began to hum, "Let me hide myself in thee."

Don Graham stood up. "I've got to be going . . . I'm not looking for a place to hide," he said.

Something soft brushed against his leg, and Don Graham looked down. It was a cat, a sleek, tailless, almost black cat, a Manx. Like Mr. Nibbs, the cat had only one eye.

"It's only Lucifer," Mr. Nibbs said.

Don Graham didn't like this. Something was definitely wrong and definitely terrifying. There was evil, he felt, concentrated in this dingy room and in Mr. Nibbs. And oddly enough, Mr. Nibbs, scrawny, old, with sparse thatched hair, who had only one good eye, somehow gave the impression of unlimited power. Graham didn't exactly know how he knew this—but it was true.

"You wonder why I've told you this," Mr. Nibbs said. He bent forward. His lips quivered. "I told you," he said, his voice now sibilant, "because *I know men*. There's a secret in your face, Don Graham, a bitter secret. You may not need me today, perhaps not tomorrow, but when you do, come to me . . . come to me . . . come to Brother Nibbs." Once more he started humming.

Don Graham could only stare. "Thanks," he said, "I'll remember."

The Manx cat made a leap and landed on top of the safe where it stood with arched back squinting sleepily with his one eye.

Mr. Nibbs chuckled, an unpleasant sound. "Lucifer," he said, "rearing his ugly head."

GRAHAM turned and walked out. The rain had faded to a light drizzle. He started uptown. At 46th Street he turned east until he came to the three story brownstone house. He let himself in, climbed two flights of stairs, then knocked on the door. A small man with a pinched face and burning eyes opened it. It was José. He stepped back, let Graham in, then closed the door and locked it.

There were two iron cots with hard pillows and harder mattresses, a wash stand with an enameled pitcher and basin, and an old wicker rocker and a kitchen chair. Cracked linoleum covered the floor. A single small drop-light with a tin shade hung from the center of the ceiling.

José's straight black hair came down over his ears, almost to his collar. This made him look like an Indian—an Indian with black, fanatical eyes. He had queer hands. Like his feet, they were small; the fingers were thin, except for the knuckles, which looked swollen.

"You have news, comrade?" José asked in a whisper.

That whisper, too, dated back to that time. He had screamed and screamed until something had gone wrong with his vocal cords. He would never be able to speak normally again.

"Nothing," said Graham. "I didn't expect much. I was only reconnoitering. I went to see Meechling first. He was out of town. Meechling was the small frightened one. Remember him?"

"I remember all," José whispered.

"Then I went to see Gabriel. I told him we had to have it back, everything they stole, down to the last *peseta*. Gabriel offered me money."

"Money?" José took a few quick steps

until he was directly in front of Don Graham, and looked up at him with anxious eyes.

Graham smiled down at him. "They tried to bribe me in the first place, José, and couldn't. You don't think I'd let them do it now?"

José looked down at the floor. "I am sorry. My fault," he whispered, "all my fault, comrade."

"They offered to pay me if I would tell them where it was," said Don Graham, "but I wouldn't tell them, and now they're offering to pay me again if I'll let them keep it, and I won't let them."

Still looking at the floor, José said: "They would never have the treasure, only me, I am a coward. I talked."

"Forget it," said Graham. "You're no coward, I know that—and we'll get it back."

José reached inside the cotton blouse he wore. From a homemade leather sheath he brought forth a knife—a shoemaker's knife with a sharp curved end. José had been a shoemaker before the war had made him a corporal.

"Or else thees," he whispered. His thumb ran lovingly across the razor edge. "Thees Zimmerman—he laugh that time. I like to hear him laugh when I use thees on him."

Would it come to that? Would it be José with his knife? Back there in Madrid engulfed by the horrors of war, that hadn't seemed so terrible. He even had had visions of himself with his long strong fingers about Zimmerman's fat neck choking him. But somehow here in New York retribution became only cold-blooded murder. And yet he'd have to get it back, those gold ornaments, the chalices, and all that had once been entrusted to his care and taken from him—he'd have to get that all back, of course. Otherwise he wouldn't be able to live.

And he'd have to have vengeance for the memory of the things they had done to him. Worse than the thing itself was the shameful memory. He'd have to get even if only so that he could bear it with-

out wincing when someone pitied him, like that girl.

"Something I want to know, comrade," José said. "Why you fight for Loyalists? The *Frente Popular* no interest to you. The C. N. T.—the Syndicalists, to you they mean nothing. The U. G. T.—the Socialists, the F. A. I.—thees Anarchists, all is nothing to you. Why you fight for us? Why you fight so brave, like a man crazy?"

Graham rolled a cigarette. He didn't quite know how to answer that.

"I don't know who's right or wrong over there, José," he said. "It just sort of happened. I was there in Madrid when the war started. I joined up with you because things were so bad in Madrid, so much confusion, so much muddling, so many lives lost that shouldn't have been lost and before I knew it, the thing that I was fighting for suddenly seemed bigger than I was. I didn't stop to think."

The fanatic light in José's eyes changed. "You don't believe in thees thing, comrade?" he said sadly.

"I don't know, José. Sometimes I think that everything you believe is right and sometimes I don't. I've seen things done . . . Well, I don't know."

"In war—in war sometimes you have to do things not so nice."

DON GRAHAM knew there must be a right answer to that—but he couldn't think of it at once. And then there were heavy footsteps in the hall stopping in front of their door. There was a loud knock.

José said: "I let him in, yes?" He looked questioningly at Don Graham.

Graham nodded. José unlocked the door. At the sight of their visitor, he let out a soft hiss. Almost instinctively his hand slipped inside his blouse where the knife was.

Zimmerman was a mountain of a man; he had a sort of gross majesty about him, like one of the later Caesars. He was over six feet and must have weighed nearly three hundred pounds. The outlines of his

squarish face were blurred with fleshiness—but his mouth and eyes were calculating and wore the cruel, lazy look of a tiger.

"I hope I'm not intruding," he said and came in.

Don Graham said nothing. He just looked at Zimmerman. Zimmerman hadn't changed. He still wore his hair cropped so close that he looked almost bald. His enormous face was a little more florid and where there had been two chins, there now threatened to be a third.

Everything about Fritz Zimmerman was superficially deceptive, from the steady guileless china blue eyes with the little crinkly lines at their corners to the huge layers of fat that covered his body. He was by no means soft, nor was he slow. He was strong as a bull, too.

"Gabriel telephoned me," he said in his great booming voice. "Told me you were in town, and I came right over."

Zimmerman went over to the rocker. He took off his great coat, folded it carefully and placed it over the back of the rocker. He sat down, not heavily, but easily. The old rocker creaked under his weight. Zimmerman looked about the room, took in its shabbiness but made no comment.

After a while Graham said: "Did Gabriel tell you what I came for?"

Zimmerman reached into his pocket and fished out a piece of cheap hard candy. With his strong white teeth he bit off a chunk and chewed it with noisy relish. He took out a single eyeglass attached to a broad black ribbon, deftly screwed it in his right eye and surveyed José.

"Who's your friend?"

Little José moved quickly in front of Zimmerman's rocker. "You don't remember me. You forget José, ha?" José's hand came out of his blouse empty. He started to reach for his long black hair with both hands but changed his mind. "Look, Meester Zimmerman," he whispered. He held out his hands exhibiting the outrageously enlarged knuckles.

Not a muscle in Zimmerman's florid face moved.

"Now you remember me?" José whispered.

Zimmerman made no comment. He kept munching at his candy until he had swallowed the last of it. He brushed his hands together, then said:

"Sure, sure, you were the little guy. You did fine. You took a lot of punishment. I got to hand it to you."

The last words were not entirely clear to José. But he understood the huge man's contempt for him, his complete indifference to everything that had happened or would happen to him. José moved closer, thrust his head forward until his pinched face was almost in Zimmerman's.

"You laugh, *señor*, when it happen. You laugh," he whispered hoarsely.

Zimmerman didn't draw back. The hatred in José's eyes appeared to leave him cold.

"Sure," he said carelessly. "I remember, I laughed." Zimmerman laughed now. "You'd have laughed too if you could have seen your face that time—all screwed up, and your teeth made funny noises clicking together. I thought your eyes would pop out, but you did fine. It took a pretty long time but I knew in the end—"

Graham got up. He limped over to Zimmerman. His face was white. His eyes were hot and stormy and when he spoke his voice shook a little.

"Shut your mouth!" he said.

ZIMMERMAN looked up with indifference. He smiled and took another piece of candy from his pocket. "The little guy's all right. You've got me all wrong. I like him. I came here to straighten things out with you, Graham, and I'll do something for him, too—he did a lot for us."

Through tight lips Graham said: "There's only one thing you can do for us."

"You're on the wrong track, young fellow," Zimmerman said. "You're all mixed up. You're like the rest of these guys who get mixed up in a cause, they

can only see one side of things and most of the time that's the wrong side." He took off his eyeglass, polished it with a green silk handkerchief and put it back in his eye. "According to what Gabriel told me you think we're a bunch of crooks. That's not so. We're in this just the same as you are. I admit we've got business interests over there, but even if we didn't, we'd be for Franco and the Nationalists. If we want to fight for the Rebels, that's our business, ain't it? Sure, we treated you rough, you and your friend, here." He made a gesture with his hands, palms upwards. "But what do you expect? That's war. You joined the Foreign Brigade and we joined Franco's Fifth Column." He paused, a reminiscent look in his steady china blue eyes. "Who does that gold and stuff belong to? To the Loyalists, so we took it away from them—the spoils of war. Who's got a right to it? Are you thinking of going to the police? If you are, forget it."

"I'm not thinking of going to the police," Don Graham said.

"Now you're talking sense. If you were satisfied that we were using that gold for the benefit of the Rebels, that we were buying munitions with it—bombs, machine guns, rifles and even aeroplanes—you'd think we were all right, wouldn't you? You'd agree that we weren't doing any more than what you are trying to do—help win a war for one side as against the other?"

"Are you doing that?"

Zimmerman made a gesture.

"That's just what I'm here for, to prove to you that we are. I'm in the export business, Graham. Zimmerman, Meechling & McLaughlin, Exporters and Importers. We've got a warehouse down on South Street and we've got a job for you. You come on down there and you can look at the stuff as we're getting it ready for shipment—cases and cases of machine guns and bombs. We're not marking them that way, you understand. There's an embargo against shipping arms to Spain. The cases are marked, 'Rivets,

Bolts and Nuts' and things like that, and there are bolts and nuts and rivets in 'em—on top—but underneath there are machine guns.

"You can go through those cases yourself. You can see the tramp steamer we charted to take the stuff to Franco. That job I've got for you is going to pay good money because you know about machine guns and things like that. Some of these firms we're buying stuff from are liable to stick us. We want you to pass on the goods."

NEVER had Zimmerman looked more genial, and the more genial Zimmerman looked, the more dangerous he was. For the moment now Don Graham was baffled.

He felt a tug on his sleeve. José was standing beside him, looking up at him with desperate, pleading eyes.

"You don't believe thees things, comrade? Lies, all lies."

Graham turned from him and studied Fritz Zimmerman. "All right," he said slowly, "I'll take that job. If you're telling the truth I'll leave you alone. I'll forget what you did to José and me. It's war, a dirty kind of war, but war is never clean."

"Comrade! Comrade!" It was a wailing, whispering cry from José, filled with hopelessness.

Graham silenced him with a gesture.

"When do you want me to come down to your place?" he asked Zimmerman.

Zimmerman opened his right eye wide so that his monocle dropped and hung dangling from its ribbon. He took hold of the ribbon and spun the monocle.

"Say—say the day after tomorrow. The first lot of stuff is due to arrive then, and I'll have a little office fixed up for you. I'm glad you see it in the right light and you won't regret it."

He rose, picked up his coat, put it on, then held out his hand.

Don Graham pretended not to notice.

"I'll see you the day after tomorrow."

Zimmerman turned toward the door.

He found José standing there with his back to it. José's knife was out. He was holding it between the thumb and the first two fingers, because he couldn't close all of his hand. There was an insane glitter in José's eyes.

"I keel you," José whispered, "I keel you."

Zimmerman eyed him steadily.

"José!" Don Graham's voice was sharp. "Put that knife away!"

José was a soldier. Like so many of those who made up the army of Madrid, he hadn't at first known what discipline was, but he knew it now. He put the knife back in its sheath, and nothing else. Sullenly he stepped away from the door.

Zimmerman said, "Good night." He moved calmly and didn't even look at José as he went out.

Don Graham sat in the rocker. He rocked gently to and fro, a faraway expression in his eyes. José came over and looked at him intently. There was bitterness in José's eyes.

"What do you think?" Don Graham said.

"I think maybe I make mistake," José said. "*Milicias Populares*, they put you in prison because they think you help steal all that money. José, he get you out. He say Don Graham, he will get him back. I think I make a mistake."

"A mistake?"

José nodded. His mouth was drawn.

"You mad, you very mad—mad at *Milicias Populares* for whom you fight so brave. They lock you up and you say, 'I get even; I no fight for Loyalists any more. I work with other side, with Meester Zimmerman and his friends. I get money, plenty money.' José understand. My people treat you very bad, but I think maybe you are so big, you forget. I make a mistake. What you think?"

A slow smile came to Don Graham's features. José watching, looked puzzled at first, then suddenly contrite and ashamed. Impulsively he held out his hand. Don Graham took it, remembering not to squeeze it.

CHAPTER III

- THE ENEMY AT HOME

HILDA MEECHLING was studying her husband coolly. For two days something had been bothering him. She didn't ordinarily ask many questions, but instinctively she felt that this was something she ought to know about.

"What on earth is the matter with you?" she demanded. "You're as nervous as seven cats."

Meechling's coffee cup jangled against the saucer. He shifted in his chair. He was a small man, and sparrowlike, with a deeply lined face that made him look older than he actually was. His eyes were pale and apprehensive.

"Tell me," she commanded. "I have a right to know."

He put his cup down and began running his thin fingers over the breakfast cloth. "The man in Madrid I told you about—the American," he said in a low voice, not looking up.

Hilda's smile was acid. "Not a guilty conscience surely—at this late date?" Then, almost as if to herself: "I should like to have met that man."

Meechling laughed shrilly. "Maybe you will. He isn't dead, you see. He's—he's in New York. He told Gabriel he was here to—to get even. He wants the gold back. . . ."

"I should think he might," Hilda said, stretching her arms upward. Even with his worry Meechling took pleasure in looking at the deep-bosomed fullness of her figure, in watching the sleek smoothness of her movements, in enjoying the way the sun touched up the pale gold of her hair.

Hilda was a beauty and knew it. Her features weré chiseled and quite perfect; her complexion was flawless; her dark blue eyes were fringed with long lashes; her mouth was large and scarlet. She was invariably aloof, tantalizingly passive, a never-ending challenge to all men.

Meechling, whenever he thought of it, never ceased to marvel that he had succeeded where other men had lost out.

"Suppose he *is* here, this man from Madrid," Hilda said, "why should that make you nervous?"

"You don't know him. He's a devil, a fiend. Give him a machine gun—"

"Why give him a machine gun?" Hilda said without smiling.

"You're a fine lot, you and Gabriel and McLaughlin." She paused for imperceptible seconds, then added, "And Zimmerman—all afraid of one man."

"And a cripple at that," Meechling said dispiritedly.

"A cripple?"

Meechling nodded.

"We did that to him. At least the men we hired did it. He limps."

Hilda's eyes widened. "What can he do to you?"

"I don't know," Meechling said morosely.

"Can he go to the police?"

"I don't think so. He brought somebody with him, the little Spaniard who told us where the stuff was hidden."

Hilda shook her head. She wasn't surprised that her husband was frightened; he was always frightened. And Gabriel didn't have too much courage either, but McLaughlin and most of all Zimmerman—it wasn't possible that Zimmerman was afraid.

"This has got to be straightened out," Meechling declared with surprising determination. "Zimmerman's got to give him whatever he wants. I'll *insist* on it."

For once Hilda lost some of her poise. The idea of her husband telling Zimmerman what to do was a novelty.

"Never you mind," he said darkly. "This time Zimmerman will do as I say." Meechling sipped the last of his coffee, wiped his mouth and put down the napkin.

"I've got to get down to the office early. We're having a conference," he said. "Something's got to be done."

Hilda nodded. Her husband got up, came over and kissed her goodbye, finding as usual her lips cool and unresponsive. Then he bustled out.

She waited a few minutes. They occupied a penthouse in the Village and it would take her husband some fifteen minutes to get to the office in a cab. She wanted to make a call before he got there, yet she wanted to be sure that he hadn't forgotten something and was coming back. Presently she rose, went through the french doors into the living room and picked up the telephone. She dialed the number of Zimmerman, Meechling & McLaughlin, and asked for Zimmerman.

When she got Zimmerman on the wire she said, "I hear a man from Madrid is here and he's frightened you to death."

Zimmerman roared: "Don't worry about him, beautiful, I'll take care of him. That rabbit of yours has been putting ideas into your head. When am I going to see you?"

Hilda smiled faintly. "I'd like to meet this man from Madrid," she said.

Zimmerman laughed. "That's easy," he said. "He's going to make his headquarters with us. He's due today. Why don't you drop in? You can tell Eddie that you were downtown to see your bank about an overdraft. But don't be disappointed if he tells you to go to hell."

Again Hilda smiled. "Maybe I'll drop in," she said carelessly, and hung up.

"I SAY to hell with the guy," Pat McLaughlin was saying. He sat across the desk from Fritz Zimmerman, a lanky, raw-boned Irishman, with tousled red hair and hard yellow eyes. Meechling sat near the window and next to him lounged George Gabriel, the back of his chair against the wall.

Zimmerman straightened up, and took a piece of candy from the box on his desk.

"Listen, you're a lawyer, Gabriel," McLaughlin went on. "What can this guy Graham do? In the first place the stuff didn't belong to him; it belonged to the Loyalists. In the second place, he can't prove that we took it, and in the third place if there was a crime it was committed in Spain."

Gabriel turned his restless eyes on Pat

McLaughlin. "There isn't anything he can do as far as I can see, except of course if he could show that we brought the stuff in through the Customs House without declaring it for what it was, it might be very unpleasant."

Zimmerman roared with laughter. "You remember that? How scared Meechling was? He almost gave the whole show away."

"You hadn't told me," Mr. Meechling said in an aggrieved tone, "that you had given the inspector a thousand dollars so that he wouldn't open the cases."

"Even if I had," Zimmerman said, slapping himself on the knee, "you still would have been scared." Then he grew suddenly serious. "I'm not afraid of Graham's going to the police. The thing we have to worry about is that Graham might take it into his head to slip behind one of us some dark night and stick a knife into us. He's just that crazy, and the Spaniard is worse."

"Let him try," McLaughlin said, "and I'll knock his block off."

"You might," Zimmerman said, "if he didn't get the knife into you first."

McLaughlin scowled. He threw one leg over the other and clasped his knee with his big hands.

"I don't see how getting him here helps much."

Zimmerman gave his deep rumbling laugh.

"Sometimes I wonder where you fellows would end up if it weren't for me and my brains," he asserted good-naturedly. "This guy is hipped on the war. I don't think he gives a damn which side he's on, but he fights, and he fights like hell for the side that he picked. Up to now this thing's been kind of a personal issue with him. We made him suffer like the devil. We crippled him—"

"Is there any need of dwelling on that?" George Gabriel said uncomfortably.

"Well I don't like the idea," McLaughlin said grimly, "of throwing a lot of money away buying machine guns and bombs and junk for him to look at, so

that he can satisfy himself that we're really working for the Rebels. It don't make sense."

"They're not going to cost much," Zimmerman declared. "I bought them from a second-hand dealer. I'd hate to fire one of those guns myself. They'd go off in your face."

"Then they won't fool Graham," McLaughlin persisted. "What's the sense in that?"

"No, they won't fool him, but they'll keep him busy until I've made up my mind what's to be done with him."

McLAUGHLIN sat up. Gabriel brought the front legs of his chair down hard and stared at Zimmerman. Meechling made a funny sound in his throat.

A strange change had come over Zimmerman's features. They were no longer genial.

"You mean—?" Gabriel began.

"I mean it would be nice if we were to ship this Graham and the Spaniard back to the Loyalists . . . *in a couple of caskets!*" Fritz Zimmerman laughed. It sounded as though great hailstones were dropping on a tin roof.

For a time there was a silence, then Gabriel, a little pale around the gills, said:

"Is that—is that necessary?"

"I know men," Zimmerman ground out. "This Graham will never let up on us. It's either him or us. I can fool him for a little while but I can't fool him forever. We can't go and buy five million dollars worth of munitions and load them on a steamer just to please him, and that's about all that will satisfy him."

McLaughlin was staring moodily down at his hands. His yellow eyes were now dull. "How about buying him off?"

"He won't be bought off," Zimmerman said. "We tried that in Madrid, didn't we? We tried to bribe him to tell us where the stuff was, and where did we get? He's a nut, I tell you."

Again there was a silence, broken by Meechling.

"I won't have it," he said, "it's murder! I won't have it!"

The others stared at him. It was the first time as far as they could remember that he had ever asserted himself.

Zimmerman's face was wooden. "You thought we'd killed him back in Madrid," Zimmerman said with surprising lack of vehemence. "You didn't mind then."

"That was in Madrid," Meechling said. "Here it's different. We'd be sure to be caught." The terror in his voice mounted.

"There isn't any other way," Zimmerman retorted doggedly.

He surprised Gabriel and McLaughlin a little. It wasn't like Zimmerman to stand for much of an argument.

Meechling got up, clasped his hands behind his back and started walking up and down the floor. Finally he came to a halt in front of Zimmerman. It was obvious that what he was about to say required all his courage.

"I won't have it," he said shrilly, and then he slapped his hand on top of Zimmerman's desk and said again, "I won't have it!"

McLaughlin and Gabriel held their breath, waiting for the storm to break. They had seen Zimmerman enraged before. They had seen him once almost literally tear apart a man who had incurred his anger—a sailor on board that little tramp steamer on which they had brought the stuff across from Valencia. But surprisingly enough, Zimmerman only laughed now. Neither of them realized that Zimmerman was most deadly when he laughed. He picked up the candy from his desk and held it out towards Mr. Meechling.

"Have a piece of candy," he said affably. "If that's the way you feel about it, all right. We'll work out something else. There's no hurry. By the time Graham gets through inspecting all the bum guns I've bought, we'll hit on something."

Meechling, white and shaken, turned away. There was no triumph in his attitude. Curiously it was as though he had expected no other outcome from the argument.

CHAPTER IV

FACTORS OF DANGER

FOR minutes no one said anything. Then McLaughlin asserted: "It's about time we liquidated the rest of the stuff. We've had it now for more than a year."

Zimmerman drummed on the table. "It's not easy to get rid of," he said. "A lot of it is church stuff and there's all that gold plate."

"Why not break it up and sell it for old gold?" McLaughlin demanded.

"Where?" Zimmerman asked. "If you've got a watch or a couple of rings and trinkets like that, it's easy. But when you come in with thousands of pounds of old gold, it ain't so good. It's liable to get into the newspapers. The first thing you know the Government gets wind of it and wants to know where we got it."

"Then how are we going to get rid of it?" George Gabriel asked. "We've done some pretty awful things to get it. We've run incredible risks. What good was all that if we can't cash in on it?"

Fritz Zimmerman nodded. He took out his monocle and stuck it in his eye to survey Gabriel.

"We've got agents, haven't we? We've got them all over the world. I've set them to work. We'll sell the lot in some foreign country, that's what. We won't get what it's worth but that's better than getting into trouble."

He turned his head and eyed Meechling, who sat staring at the floor.

Gabriel coughed. "Now that this new situation has arisen," he said apologetically, "don't you think, Fritz, that we'd better all have a key to the vault? As it stands, only you and Eddie have got keys. If something were to happen to both of you, not that I expect that it will—"

Zimmerman helped himself to another piece of candy. "Two keys are enough," he said. "Besides if something happened to us, nobody's going to take the keys away from us. They wouldn't do them any good. You have to sign when you go into

a vault, if they don't know you. The signatures wouldn't match. Don't you agree with me, Eddie?"

Meechling, lost in reverie, started. "What's that, Fritz, what's that?"

"I said two keys to the vault are enough." Zimmerman eyed him steadily, almost fiercely.

"Sure," Meechling said, "sure. Two keys are plenty. What do we want with more keys?"

McLaughlin started to say something, but Zimmerman's secretary, Vera Higgins, came in.

"There's someone here to see you, Mr. Zimmerman. He says his name is Graham," she said. She never took her eyes off Zimmerman.

"Let him come in," Zimmerman said after a couple of seconds.

Don Graham came in. He advanced a half a dozen feet or so, then stood, one hand in the pocket of his trenchcoat, the other on his cane, tall and austere. His eyes swept them.

Zimmerman got up and so did Meechling and Gabriel. Pat McLaughlin alone sat still, his long legs stretched out. Graham had a funny effect on him, made him feel small and unimportant, but he'd be damned if he'd show it by getting up.

"Glad to see you, Graham," Zimmerman boomed. "This is going to work out fine."

"This is going to work out," Don Graham said quietly.

There followed an awkward silence. Then Zimmerman said:

"You remember McLaughlin, Meechling and Gabriel, of course."

"Yes, I remember them."

"Have a chair."

Eddie Meechling essayed a placating smile. George Gabriel coughed to hide his nervousness, while McLaughlin made only a growling sound.

Don Graham stood where he was.

"When do I look this stuff over?"

"I expect the trucks will be arriving this afternoon," Zimmerman said, going back to his desk. "I hope it's all right. I

don't know much about guns, I guess. In the meantime I've had an office fixed up for you right next to mine. You might start in by going over the invoices, checking them with the orders."

GRAHAM nodded. Nobody was deceived; nobody felt that Fritz Zimmerman had accomplished anything. This was going to be a fight and nothing else.

Vera Higgins came in again. "Mrs. Meechling is here," she announced. Her expression was taut, her small hands were clenched as her eyes bored into Fritz Zimmerman. She disliked all attractive women and Hilda Meechling most of all.

Meechling looked surprised. "Tell her—tell her to wait in my office."

"No, let her come in here," Zimmerman ordered. "She's heard of Graham. Perhaps she'd like to meet him."

Hilda came in, walking with long easy strides. She wore a green tweed suit with a cardigan jacket, and a felt hat. The outfit made her look younger and slimmer than she was.

"How are you? How are you?" Zimmerman boomed. He stood up and the monocle slipped out of his eye and moved up and down on his fat stomach. "I'd like you to meet Mr. Graham, Mrs. Meechling."

She walked quite close to Don Graham, eyeing him with calm indifference. She said: "How do you do?" almost as though he weren't there, then added, "You don't look so formidable."

Don Graham stared past her and said nothing.

"I don't see why they should be afraid of you," she went on, her tone just a trifle more marked.

"Hilda!" Meechling protested.

Graham turned his head slowly until his eyes rested full upon her. "They're not afraid of me," he said slowly. "They're afraid of what they've done."

"Listen, I'm not afraid of anything," McLaughlin barked.

Zimmerman broke in: "This is good; like a scene from a play—very dramatic. I like it."

Meechling went to the window. He stood with his back to the others, staring out across the street to where, on the opposite side, gray docks lined the East River. Presently he turned.

"Is there anything else?" he said to Zimmerman.

"Lots of things," Zimmerman said. "Somebody's got to go over and see Brewer & Co. about that last lot of ginseng. They made a claim for a shortage, and somebody's got to go to the bank about that loan to be renewed. Then there are those gum copal contracts to be gone over. That's Gabriel's job. Then we've got to check last month's figures. It looks as though we made a little money."

He turned to Don Graham. "You see, this is a busy firm. You can appreciate why we need you." He didn't wait for any answer. He turned back to his associates. "I think we'd better have lunch sent up here to save time. I was hoping to take Graham to lunch but I can't make it. I tell you what," he added as though it were a sudden inspiration, "Hilda, you take Graham to lunch." He turned to Meechling and gave him a gigantic wink.

Meechling frowned. Hilda looked at Don Graham. There was a slight enigmatic smile on her lips.

"I can find a place to eat by myself," Don Graham said ungraciously, "and I'd rather eat alone."

Zimmerman glanced at Hilda. She showed no sign of any emotion.

"I've got to be going," she declared. "I have a lot of things to do."

"What did you come in for?" Zimmerman taunted her.

"To get a look at Mr. Graham," she declared. With that she walked out.

Meechling hesitated a moment and then hastened after her. He caught up with her in the outer office and drew her to one side. From his pocket he took a key ring and detached one key—a thin flat key. He pressed it into her hand.

"Keep it," he whispered, "—the key to the vault where the stuff is stored. Zimmerman has the other."

She gazed at him without comprehension.

"If anything—if anything happens to me, take that key right to Zimmerman. Give it to him right away. Don't try to get into the vault yourself. Don't try to do anything with it."

"Now what's worrying you?" she asked. She studied her husband curiously. There was a greenish pallor about his face.

"I'm more afraid of—" he started, then stopped.

Zimmerman was coming in with Graham beside him. Zimmerman was taking Graham to the latter's office.

Zimmerman paused for an instant and stuck his monocle into his eye while he studied little Meechling and Hilda. Zimmerman's face was as guileless as ever, his china blue eyes were free from any expression. He turned, and taking hold of Graham's arm, led him into the small office he had had prepared.

WHEN Zimmerman came out a few minutes later, Hilda had gone and Meechling had disappeared into his own office farther down the hall. Zimmerman went back to his room. Gabriel had left and so had McLaughlin. He punched a button and presently Vera Higgins came in. She was in her late twenties, with a flat straight figure like a boy's, dressed in a mannish-looking suit. Her black hair was done simply, her features were small and regular. There was something sexless about her, something that suggested that she was incapable of any emotions. It was only her eyes that gave her away, black eyes that glowed intensely, with a kind of penetrating passion.

Without looking up Fritz Zimmerman said: "There are a few letters."

He expected her to come and sit down at his desk, but instead she stood where she was, fixing Zimmerman with smoldering eyes.

Fritz Zimmerman glanced up, eyed her speculatively, then chuckled in his rumbling way.

Something like fury leaped high in Vera

Higgins' eyes. For a second her thin lips moved, without making a sound.

"Are you in love with that alley cat? I mean the Meechling woman."

Zimmerman made no reply.

"I was at the switchboard this morning when she telephoned," she went on, her voice growing flatter. "I overheard what she said to you and what you said to her."

Still Zimmerman said nothing.

Vera took a step toward him, stood still, her flat straight body trembled a little. When next she spoke she tried to make her voice conciliating.

"You can't do this, Fritz," she said, "not after what's happened . . . I mean between you and me."

Fritz Zimmerman leaned back in his chair. "I thought you understood me better than that, Vera. Just because of what's happened doesn't mean that I can't do as I please. You don't own me. I'll do what I want to."

Vera's hands clenched. A look of pain came to her eyes, to be replaced by a look of fury.

"You don't understand *me* either," she flared back through tight lips. "You're not going to throw me aside just—just like that. At least not without being sorry."

"It is foolish to threaten," he said.

She shook her head, a stubborn determined little gesture. Then she pushed her small rounded jaw forward.

"What do you think McLaughlin would say," she spat at him, "and Gabriel, if I told them . . . ? What do you think would happen to you?"

The look on Zimmerman's face grew, if anything, more genial. With his hands braced on his desk he heaved his bulky form out of the chair and without haste walked over to where she stood.

She compressed her lips more tightly but made no comment, only looking him steadily in the eye.

Without warning Zimmerman slapped her sharply across the right cheek. The blow rocked her head. She flinched but gave no ground. He slapped her other cheek, then struck her across the mouth

with the back of his huge hand. Towering over her he looked down at her. He appeared amused. Then he turned and walked back to his desk, turned again to face her, half sitting on his desk.

VERA hadn't moved. She stood there, her face deadly white, save for the red marks that Zimmerman's fingers had left on her cheeks, and a tiny drop of blood that trickled from the corner of her mouth down her chin.

Zimmerman, his thick lips drooping at the corners, said:

"Now go tell McLaughlin, tell Gabriel, tell the police if you want to. . . . Come here," he said.

She hesitated a moment, then obeyed. He put one arm about her shoulders and pressed her to him. With his free hand he stroked her hair.

"There, there," he said soothingly, "we'll forget all about it. Just say you're sorry and we'll forget all about it."

With her head pressed against his bulging chest, she said in a small voice, "I'm sorry," then suddenly burst into sobs as though her heart would break.

Zimmerman held her for a time, then he let her go.

"It's all over," he said. "Here—blow." He held his green silk handkerchief for her. "Speaking of Meechling's wife," he went on, "reminds me of Meechling. We're going to have trouble with Meechling, I'm afraid."

Vera forgot her outburst of passion, her jealousy and her grief. Fritz was in danger. That was more important than anything else.

Until she had met him, her life had been empty. And Fritz Zimmerman had given her everything. What he saw in her he never quite knew, except that she was such a prim little thing that twisting her around his finger had amused him for a while.

"Meechling wouldn't dare," Vera said breathlessly. "He's afraid of you."

Zimmerman nodded complacently. He scratched his close-cropped head. "The

trouble is, he's even more afraid of Don Graham and that, coupled with an attack of conscience, makes him dangerous. At the meeting a little while ago, he practically told me just how far I could go. He was like you, Vera. He almost threatened me."

Vera dropped her eyes. "I said I was sorry," she said.

Fritz Zimmerman ignored that. "The question is what am I going to do? There are two types of men which are dangerous—a weakling with his back to the wall—that's Meechling—and a crazy man—that's Don Graham. He's even more dangerous. He's a crazy man that's strong."

"Is there—is there anything that I can do?" Vera asked. There was an odd look in her eyes.

Fritz Zimmerman laughed. "Women aren't much use in things like this. And Graham's too cracked to look at one. No—not even Hilda . . ."

Fritz Zimmerman shook his head.

Vera sank her teeth into her nether lip. She turned her back on Fritz Zimmerman and started for the door. Not even Hilda . . . It never occurred to him what he was doing to her, when he said, "Not even Hilda," that way.

She went out into her own small office adjacent to Zimmerman's. For a time she stood gazing bleakly into space. Her frail body sagged as though she were tired, very tired. Then suddenly she straightened up, looking in a distraught way about the room.

"I'll show him," she said, "I'll show him."

CHAPTER V

THE TERRIBLE MR. NIBBS

AT WELDON'S Rock of Ages Mission, the eight o'clock meeting was over. The room was emptying itself, Mr. Nibbs' little flock was making its way out into the street—all but those to whom Mr. Nibbs had given permanent shelter. They stepped up onto the platform and followed Mr. Nibbs into his stuffy office. Five in

all. Mr. Nibbs sat down eyeing each one of them in turn.

"There's nothing on for tomorrow," he said in his rasping voice. "In fact I see nothing in the immediate future unless—" A thoughtful look came into Mr. Nibbs' left eye, "unless a newcomer who was here a few days ago brings something our way."

A short, squat individual with a flat face and with coarse muddy brown hair who went by the name of Pudgy Myers, said:

"I'm gonna need some money, Mr. Nibbs. Me' old mother out in St. Louis is pretty sick. She's gonna need an operation. It's gonna cost some dough."

Pudgy strove mightily to fill his hard voice with feeling, but he brought no sympathy into Mr. Nibbs' one good eye. In fact when Mr. Nibbs spoke, his voice was harsher than usual.

"I happen to know, Brother Myers," he said, "that your poor old mother in St. Louis is a little blonde down at the Imperial Burlesque on 16th Street."

"Listen, Mr. Nibbs," Pudgy Myers began in a growling belligerent tone that quickly died to a mere whine, "I figure I'm due for some dough." Pudgy's pale, piggish eyes unconsciously went to the safe. "A fella's got to have a little fun, ain't he?"

"That is very true," said Mr. Nibbs, his tone more appeased, and added with startling fierceness, "but don't tell me any lies." He reached into his pocket, extracted a fat roll of bills, peeled off a few and passed them to Pudgy. "Have your fun, but have it in some quiet place. Stay away from the hot spots. It wouldn't look well if it became known that one who is dependent on the Rock of Ages Mission went about throwing his money away on a little blonde." Mr. Nibbs tapped fretfully with his long fingers on the top of his desk.

He withdrew his attention from Pudgy Myers, his eyes resting on the man next to him, a man well over six feet, with fixed rigid eyes, a sharp nose and a square

pugnacious chin. The man had a curious way of holding himself, his feet spread slightly apart, his long arms hanging at his sides, and all of him immobile, as rigid as his eyes. The man went by the name of Jones.

Lucifer, the Manx cat, just then was weaving his way in and out between Jones' legs. Jones shoved Lucifer to one side with his right foot, a mechanical, remote sort of gesture. Lucifer arched his back and spat at him without getting any of Jones' attention.

"I'm tired of sittin' around and doin' nothin'," Jones said in a hollow, monotonous voice. "I don't want no blondes, no hot spots. I want to be doin' somethin'." His long arms came up, his huge hands moved, curling and uncurling.

"Be patient," said Mr. Nibbs. "I have a feeling that something will turn up—shortly. The man who came here, the one I just mentioned, who was here a few days ago, his name's Graham—Don Graham. Don't ask me why I feel that way. It's just instinct—animal instinct. It's like Lucifer not liking you. Nobody would like you, Jones, and yet nobody would quite know why they wouldn't like you."

Nothing in Jones' face betrayed his reactions to Mr. Nibbs' speech. He just let his long arms drop and once more stood immovable, like a statue carved by a demented sculptor.

MR. NIBBS' eye went on. A man with a nervous face, not yet middle-aged, who had quick restless eyes and deft hands—hands with which he was forever making gestures as though he were snatching things out of the air. What his name was, no one knew. Mr. Nibbs and the others were in the habit of referring to him as Handsy. And next to Handsy stood Runner Smith. Runner Smith in appearance was an ordinary individual. There was nothing at all about him that was in any way remarkable. He might have been a salesman, a shoe clerk, a newspaper vendor, or under happier circum-

stances, even the vice-president of a bank. Yet Runner Smith wasn't without his talents. He could play a tune on a tommy gun, on a machine gun, such as few men could, and Mr. Nibbs was wont to treat him with great respect. Some day—some day the time might come when Runner Smith might prove himself very useful to Mr. Nibbs.

The last of the five was a little man, about forty, with a small pinched face, and very tired eyes. They called him Bugs Bindler.

"Better go to bed, Bugs," Mr. Nibbs said. "You need your sleep."

Bugs Bindler nodded, and then coughed. He coughed as though he would never stop, and the soiled handkerchief he brought to his lips came away with a little blood on it.

"If there's anything doing, Mr. Nibbs, I mean something that's kind of risky, I don't mind doing it. I ain't gonna last very long and you've been good to me—very good to me. You know about me. I got a mother—a real mother, not a little blonde—and a kid sister. They don't know about me. They think I'm an accountant here making good money."

"Yes, I know," said Mr. Nibbs.

"If it comes to taking a chanct," Bugs Bindler said, "I'll—I'll—" He had to stop. Again his small bony frame was racked with coughing. "I'll do it," he gasped. "I'm washed up. I'll do it because I figure I can trust you, Mr. Nibbs. You'll look out for Ma and the kid after—after I'm gone." He said it just like that, with no attempt to arouse sympathy, and as though his departure were already an accomplished fact.

Mr. Nibbs raised his good eye heavenward.

"It is only human to sin, Bugs," he said piously. "God will forgive that. God will help, and so will I. Maybe it was an act of Providence that sent this Don Graham to our little haven."

A sneer came into Pudgy Myers face, but he said nothing as he turned to leave.

Runner Smith said:

"Sometimes a tommy gun comes in handy too."

CHAPTER VI

GUN CASES

DON GRAHAM set to work the next day. Hundreds of cases of munitions had arrived and had been stored on the fourth and fifth lofts of the building that Zimmerman, Meechling and McLaughlin, Exporters and Importers, occupied. Zimmerman gave Graham a couple of men. The men started at the back, loaded a case on a handy truck and wheeled it up front where Graham stood. When he had finished, they nailed it up and took it back again.

The cases held weapons of every variety—Mauser rifles, Enfield rifles, Lewis machine guns with aircraft mounts, automatic pistols, shotguns and hand grenades. It was slow work opening the cases and inspecting the guns; and Don was puzzled to find they were all first-class weapons in excellent condition.

Graham couldn't believe it. He had been so sure that Zimmerman's story was a lie. Zimmerman and his crowd weren't interested in Rebel Spain. They had stolen that treasure for themselves, and yet here apparently they were spending it for munitions, real munitions. Could he have been mistaken? And if he was wrong, what was there to do for him? Nothing.

Graham, leaning on his cane, stared broodingly at the two men as they were nailing up the case he had just finished inspecting. They got the case back on the hand truck and wheeled it toward the other end, disappearing around the corner of the tier of cases.

Don Graham stood lost in thought, scarcely aware that Meechling had come in and was standing by his side.

"Everything—everything all right?" the little man quavered. The lines across his forehead were deep, and the lines that ran down from his nostrils drooped.

Without looking up, Don Graham said absently:

"Everything seems to be all right."

Suddenly Don Graham jerked his head up. Was he being tricked—tricked in the simplest of fashions? The two men were coming up with a fresh case on their hand truck. But *was* it a fresh case? Were there more than a half a dozen cases containing useable munitions and guns? Were these men bringing him the same cases over and over again in rotation? That was possible—very easily possible considering that each time they took a case, they were lost from sight for a few minutes.

The men started to open the case.

Don Graham said:

"Never mind. Put that case over there and get me one of the cases from the front. Start bringing the cases from the front where I can see you."

One of the men made a growling sound, and both of them glowered at Don Graham.

"Our orders is," the other man said, "to bring 'em from the back and put 'em back where we got 'em as soon as you get through with 'em."

Without raising his voice, Don Graham said:

"You're taking orders from me."

"That's what you think," the first man said.

"Get me one of those cases up there in front."

The man moved up until he stood close to Don Graham. He stuck out his jaw pugnaciously.

"We got our orders," he declared gruffly, "and we're gonna do it the way we were told. If you don't like it, go get the boss, Mr. Zimmerman."

He stood there, glaring.

"I don't need the boss," Don Graham said.

"Oh yeah?" The big bruiser eyed Don Graham disdainfully.

"Now, now," Mr. Meechling said feebly, his pale eyes apprehensive.

"Come on, Joe," the second man said. "If the guy don't want us to do it our way, let him move the stuff himself. We've got work downstairs."

Joe nodded, though he seemed loathe to leave.

"If you wasn't a cripple—" he muttered.

DON GRAHAM'S face went white. He was positive now that he had been tricked, and a feeling of uncontrollable anger seized him for a moment. He leaned more heavily with his left hand on his cane, while his right shot out and caught Joe flush on the mouth.

Joe staggered backward, his face for a second filled with ludicrous surprise. He made a lunge, a clumsy blow that traveled upward in a wide arc: Don Graham ducked it easily, and once more his fist shot out and almost simultaneously there was the sound of the blow, of a bone cracking and a howl of pain. Joe's hand went up to his nose. It came away covered with blood, and Joe went berserk. As he straightened himself up he yanked the stevedore hook that was draped about his neck, free, and started forward. The hook, with its sharp point, presented a formidable weapon.

Mr. Meechling let out a squeak of terror.

Joe's partner who had stood there petrified with astonishment, said:

"Take it easy, Joe. Drop that. You'll kill the guy."

Either Joe didn't care or didn't hear. He took another step forward, a ghastly figure with the blood streaming from his nose, his right arm up high holding the hook ready to bury it in Don Graham's shoulder.

It was incredible how catlike, how decisive Don Graham's movements were, despite his limp. In a flash he had shifted his cane from his left to his right hand, holding it not by the crook, but by the ferrule. It was a heavy cane, loaded, and the crook went through the air like the speed of a bullet, and the impact of the crook against Joe's wrist was like the sound of a bullet—a bullet tearing through wood.

The hook dropped from Joe's hand. He

-doubled up, holding with his left hand onto his broken wrist.

"Get him, Frank!" There was unbearable pain and rage in Joe's tone. "Get him! He's broke me wrist."

Don Graham, standing a little lopsided without the aid of his cane, turned his head slowly and looked at Joe's partner, Frank. Frank was a big man, no taller than Don Graham but much huskier. But Joe was husky too, Frank reflected, and look at Joe now. What a mess he was. A broken nose, a broken wrist, and this guy here had scarcely moved from the spot where he'd originally stood.

Frank wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and shifted his eyes away from Don Graham.

"Listen, mister," he mumbled, "I don't wanna have no trouble with you."

Don Graham said: "Take this heel with you, and get out—both of you."

Frank shrugged, and still without looking at Don Graham, took Joe by the arm and led him away protesting and moaning.

Don Graham leaned on his cane. He was looking at Meechling. There was a crooked smile on Don Graham's lips.

"There's nothing but junk in most of those cases, isn't there? Zimmerman thought he could put one over on me."

Little Meechling licked his dry lips. He put a trembling hand to his mouth and let it drop again.

"I'd—I'd help you if—if I could," he whispered.

Meechling's face was ashen. What he had just seen had only added to the terror that had gripped him almost from the moment he had heard that Don Graham was back. This man had no fear, no scruples, and you couldn't kill him. He should be dead now after what they had done to him back there in Spain.

Don Graham's crooked smile grew more marked, though there was no amusement in it.

He said slowly.

"You say you'd help me if you could. Well, I'll give you a couple of days,

Meechling, to find out just how you can help me. After that . . ."

DON GRAHAM walked down to the main floor where the offices were. He went into his own little room, turned on the cold water in the wash basin and let it run over his skinned knuckles. He looked at his watch and found it was after twelve. He didn't feel hungry but he thought he'd like a sandwich, some coffee and maybe a drink—a couple of drinks.

Out in the street he started to turn left when some one hailed him. He looked up and discovered Hilda Meechling in a little gray roadster parked by the curb. Unwillingly he went over to her.

"Can I give you a lift?" she asked. She looked at Don Graham out of the corner of her wide blue eyes, but her manner was aloof, almost indifferent.

Don Graham said: "No thanks. I'm just going around the corner to eat."

She said: "Hop in. I'll go with you."

Don Graham stood for a second hesitantly. He didn't like her, and even if he had liked her, he didn't want to go to lunch with her. He wanted to be by himself, to think. He tried to find some excuse and couldn't.

Hilda had the door of the roadster open as though it never occurred to her that he might refuse to go along. He went around the car and got in. She started the motor, let in the clutch and the car moved off softly, smoothly, evenly.

Don Graham reflected that Hilda and her car had something in common. They moved the same way, easily, smoothly. Two streamlined bodies, and there was power in both—a sleepy, controlled sort of power that would only spring to life under pressure.

"I know a place," she was saying, "a little place on Cedar Street. It's quiet and the food is good."

A few minutes later he found himself seated in a little booth facing her across the table. She was watching him through half-closed eyes, her long lashes curling upward. She had a gift for studying a per-

son while keeping herself remote. Don Graham sensed that and for no reason at all felt irritable, at a disadvantage.

"I need a drink," he said. "Will you have one?"

She nodded.

"A glass of Madeira, *Gloria Mundi*."

Don Graham gave the order to the trim little waitress that stood beside him, asking her to bring him a double extra dry Martini.

When the girl had gone, Hilda said in her throaty voice:

"How is the terrorizing business going? Have you frightened them to death yet? Have they agreed to turn back the loot?"

Don Graham glared at her. She was making a joke out of what was to him the most serious thing in the world.

"It must seem funny to you."

Hilda surprised him. "You're wrong," she was saying, her blue eyes now wide but deadly serious. "I don't think it's funny. In fact, I don't think anything in life is particularly funny."

The waitress came with the drinks and she tasted hers, while Don Graham gulped his. The woman disturbed him and he couldn't understand it.

"Gabriel and my husband," she was saying, "are cowards. You oughtn't to have much trouble with either of them. And McLaughlin is a coward too—not a physical coward but a mental one. But Zimmerman is different. You won't find Zimmerman easy to crack."

Don Graham stopped drinking and studied her frowningly.

"You don't seem to care whether or not anything happens to your husband," Don Graham said.

She shook her head just a little.

"I wouldn't want anything to happen to Eddie. Eddie's all right, but there's no use denying that he's a coward. You know that yourself. But Zimmerman is anything but a coward. Fritz is fearless and strong, and what makes him more dangerous is that he has no conscience, doesn't know right from wrong. Look out for him."

Don Graham drained his glass.

"Why do you care what happens to me?" he asked with sudden harshness. "I'm nothing to you."

Hilda toyed with the *Gloria Mundi*.

"Nothing personally," she said. "I once saw a tiger trapped, stalking helplessly about inside a pit. The tiger was stronger, more courageous than any of the men who caught him, but they had been too much for him. They were more cunning than the tiger."

DON GRAHAM shifted restlessly. He looked about for the waitress. He wanted a second drink. She came and he ordered it, and while he waited he said, "Go on. I like animal stories." She was just amusing herself with him. He was sure of that.

Hilda Meechling spilled salt onto the checkered tablecloth and made designs with her finger, not looking at Don Graham.

"I felt sorry for the tiger, though he was nothing to me, and though I knew if he ever got loose he'd tear any of his captives to pieces."

The waitress brought Don Graham's drink. This time he didn't gulp it, just sipped at it, while his eyes were riveted on Hilda, and when she unexpectedly looked up their eyes locked squarely, and held.

Don Graham said: "Well?"

"You're not very cunning, Don Graham—you're brave but foolish," Hilda said. "I'm just wondering how long it will be before they'll have you in a pit . . . how long it will be before I'll have to be sorry for you." A far-off look came into her eyes and then her glance dropped to the table and she started playing with the salt again.

Don Graham, his throat dry, said:

"What would you like to have to eat?"

"Nothing," she said. "I find I'm not hungry. You order while I finish my drink."

Don Graham wasn't hungry either. He was watching her—watching her every second, trying to understand her, to get at

the meaning of this. Had it been mere chance that he had found her in front of Zimmerman, Meechling and McLaughlin's building, or had she been deliberately waiting there for him?

Don Graham started to pay the check but she wouldn't let him.

"This is my party," she said.

"Why is it your party?"

She shrugged, paid the girl and rose. He followed her out to the car and she drove him back to his office. He climbed out. She held out her hand and he took it briefly.

"If you get into trouble," she said, "and you will . . . come to see me."

Before he could make a reply, she had driven off, leaving him there on the sidewalk looking after her with puzzled, troubled eyes.

He went inside into Fritz Zimmerman's office without knocking. Zimmerman was there alone at his desk, crunching peanut brittle.

"Sit down, sit down," Zimmerman said in his deep, rumbling voice. "Those guys that I gave you to help you had a nerve trying to pull a trick like that on you. I'm glad you knocked hell out of Joe. If you hadn't done it, I would have. I just fired him."

Don Graham took out a cigarette paper, spilled tobacco into it and rolled himself a cigarette. When he had it going, he said grimly:

"You're sure it wasn't your idea?"

"As if I would be as stupid as that. They were just a couple of lazy bums. Those cases they were bringing you were on the floor, see. It was easier to load them onto the hand truck over and over again than to pull down new ones from the top. I'll get you a couple of other men to help you."

He heaved his immense form forward and waggled a finger at Graham. "Do you know something? Maybe they weren't just lazy. Maybe they were bribed by the guy who sold me that stuff to pull that stunt. Come to think of it I'll bet that's just what happened. It wouldn't surprise me if

most of those cases held nothing but scrap iron. We've got to make sure." Never had Fritz Zimmerman looked more genial than at this moment.

"It wouldn't surprise me either," Don Graham said.

Zimmerman screwed his monocle into his eye and stared guilelessly up at the younger man.

"You check that stuff carefully and you'll be doing me a favor. You just use this whole building as though it was your own, as though you were the boss."

Don Graham said:

"I'm going home now. I'll be back tomorrow and I'm going to bring somebody with me . . . I'm going to bring José."

CHAPTER VII

ON THE HOOK

LATE the next afternoon Zimmerman was sitting at his desk. His ordinarily florid face had a bluish tinge to it. There were bags under Zimmerman's eyes, signs that he had spent a sleepless night.

Vera Higgins came in quietly. "The bank's on the phone," she said. "They want to talk to you."

Zimmerman picked up the instrument and said, "Hello." For a time he listened, and then said fretfully:

"I know it is. Everybody knows the market's dropping. You've got plenty of stuff of mine there. What are you worrying about?"

Again he listened, then:

"All right, all right. I'll see what I can do."

He put the instrument back with a bang then sat, tapping the tips of his fat fingers together.

Vera came and stood close beside him, pressing her flat body against his, stroking his close-cropped hair. He seemed unaware of her nearness, but after a minute he reached up and pushed her away.

She looked at first like a child that had been struck by a friend for no reason at all. Then she looked distressed. "Something wrong at the bank?"

Zimmerman said: "It's the market. Down, down, down—every day—down." He didn't say it to her. He just growled it into space.

"Anything wrong?" she asked again, her voice flat and afraid.

For the first time Zimmerman seemed to be thoroughly aware of her presence, of her words.

"Not a thing, not a thing," he said, sarcastically. "Everything's wonderful. Of course you wouldn't know. You're just my private secretary. You just keep my bank book and my accounts, keep track of the loans I've made, so you wouldn't know."

An insane glitter came into his china blue eyes. The lines at the corners formed sharp V's. He lumbered to his feet and stood there towering over Vera.

"An empire, an empire in my hands—railroads, coal mines, oil wells—all mine, except that I had to hock them to the banks to get more railroads, more oil wells, more mines. And the bottom dropping out of the market. Have you got any brains, any brains at all?—Can't you see what'll happen? If it keeps on I'll be cleaned out. Those Shylocks that call themselves bankers, they'll sell me out."

Vera said desperately:

"No—no, it won't happen, Fritz. You'll think of something. I've got some money. I've got almost ten thousand dollars. You can use that—"

Fritz Zimmerman threw back his massive head and laughed, not his usual rumbling laugh, but a discordant, strident sound that terrified Vera. Then he stopped laughing and looked at her contemptuously.

"What good would ten thousand dollars be? There's millions involved, you little fool."

In a voice that was scarcely audible, Vera said: "The vault—there's more in the vault."

Whether it was the way she spoke or a sudden idea, somehow Zimmerman managed to recover himself after a fashion. He stared past Vera at the opposite wall.

"Yes, of course, there is the vault. And

if it hadn't been for the arrival of this crazy man, this limping left wing fanatic, Don Graham, who wants to get even and wants the treasure back, if it wasn't for him, and Meechling who is terrified and whose actions are now unpredictable—"

JUST then Meechling came in. He stood for a time shifting from one foot to the other, looking from Zimmerman to Vera and back again to Zimmerman.

"We've got to do something, Fritz. We've got to do something."

That notion was so in accord with what Fritz Zimmerman had been thinking that it almost restored him to his genial self.

"Sure, Eddie, sure, we've got to do something. What would you like to do?"

"It's no joke," Meechling said plaintively. "I've been upstairs watching Graham going through that stuff you bought and most of it is junk. He knows you're fooling him. You ought to see the look on his face. It's worse than it was yesterday when he beat up that stevedore of ours, much worse. And the little Spaniard that's with him—you know, the one we hurt—"

"What about the little Spaniard?"

"He's got a knife," Meechling explained, his lips quivering. "He keeps taking it out and sharpening it on the sole of his shoe. It's a shoemaker's knife, you know, curved at the end for cutting leather."

"Or throats," Zimmerman interrupted callously. "What a beautiful thing a shoe maker's knife is to cut a man's throat."

Zimmerman should have known better than to talk like that, for every nerve in Eddie Meechling's body quivered in terror; every thought in Meechling's brain was tinged with an unnameable fear.

Suddenly Meechling's voice rose, grew shrill.

"We've got to give it back. Do you hear, Fritz? We've got to give it back, at least what's left of it. I *insist* on it."

A sudden hush fell over the room. The little man stood there, not looking at Zimmerman, not looking at Vera Higgins, shaking a little like a wintry tree fighting

a gale. Seconds went by and no one spoke and there was no sound save the sound of Zimmerman's strong teeth crunching a piece of peppermint.

"All right," he said at last, "I'll talk it over with you later tonight when the others have gone."

"I want it done now," Meechling cried. He was on the verge of hysteria. "Right now, let's tell him. I can't stand it another minute. I can't stand the way the Spaniard, José, looks at me every time I come by. He's going to kill me, I know it. He's going to kill me, Fritz, I can feel it. I can see it in his eyes. Do you know what he did? Let me tell you what he did."

The look in Meechling's eyes grew glassy. "I tried to be nice to him, see. I said something to him upstairs there, something about how I was glad to see he was all right, that I hoped he didn't bear any grudge, that it was all just war, just war. And what did José do? He took out that knife of his and sharpened it. I screamed. I couldn't help it. I thought he was going to kill me right then and there but he didn't."

"He just put the knife back and came close to me and grinned in my face, and he said, 'What is it you said, *señor*? I don't hear so good.'" Meechling was now literally beside himself. He paused for breath then went on. "Then he pulled back that long hair of his to show me his ears . . . where his ears used to be. You remember about his ears, Fritz?" A sickly pallor spread over Eddie Meechling's face. He swayed on his feet.

Zimmerman reached over, took him by the shoulders and shook him.

"Pull yourself together, pull yourself together," Zimmerman roared. "Nothing's going to happen to you. Do you hear?"

Meechling looked about, helplessly, and Zimmerman released him. Zimmerman's china blue eyes grew clouded, yet thoughtful, as he watched Meechling wandering out. Zimmerman sat down. He glanced at Vera and then he laughed:

"You look as bad as Meechling. I suppose you're wondering who's going to get

me first. The loan sharks, the crippled man of destiny, Don Graham, the crazy Spaniard, or Meechling. What a joke it would be if a little mouse like Eddie Meechling were to topple old Fritz Zimmerman!"

Vera said nothing. She just stood there holding her flat sexless body rigid, her hands at her sides, only her eyes alive.

"Get out the books," Zimmerman said, "my personal ledgers. Figure out the value of all the securities I own at today's market. Go out and buy yourself a copy of the *Sun* with the Wall Street closing prices. You'll probably be busy all night; it can't be helped. But I've got to have that dope first thing in the morning so I can talk to the bank. And in the meantime—I'll have a talk with Graham." Zimmerman bit on a fresh piece of candy. "I'll just tell him he and the Spaniard will have to stop frightening my little friend Meechling. Ho, ho, ho."

Alone, Vera Higgins made no move. She stood for endless seconds, clasping and unclasping her hands.

HOURS later Vera Higgins saw a dreadful sight. It was after seven. The building was practically deserted. Zimmerman was still around somewhere, so was McLaughlin pattering about in his office, as far as she knew. She had seen Eddie Meechling up on the fifth floor a short time before. He had gone up there, she thought, to talk to Don Graham. Don Graham and José hadn't been there. Perhaps they were on the floor below. She had seen Meechling standing there looking down with empty eyes at the cases and cases open, strewn about, filled with broken rifles and useless machine guns. A ghostly little figure Meechling had been standing there near the hoist, with just a single drop light hanging overhead, and shadows closing in on him . . .

Vera Higgins had gone back to her work, finishing the list of securities she was preparing for Zimmerman. It was an impressive array of properties that Zimmerman owned. But they were only technically his. He had borrowed so much

from the bank on these securities and with the market dropping, they now, to all intents and purposes, belonged to the bank. His equity in them was practically nil. If the market went down another two points or so he was wiped out, unless he could raise more margin.

Vera put down the statement. Her face was white, very white and gaunt. Once she shivered. She went into Zimmerman's office. Zimmerman wasn't there. She went into the other offices. McLaughlin was still in his room, but there was no sign of Zimmerman. Again Vera shivered. She wanted to be near Zimmerman—very near him.

She went up to the second loft, to the third, and then to the fourth, without finding him. She was about to go up to the fifth when she became aware of a sound that startled her. It was the creaking of the electric hoist overhead. The building was old; it had no elevator, just a hoist that ran through an open well down to the basement. The hoist consisted of a heavy rope running around the drum at the top of the building. There was a massive iron hook at the end of the rope. Now the rope was going up.

For a moment Vera wondered who could possibly be working the hoist at this late hour. All the workmen had left long ago.

Then she experienced a feeling of relief. That was Zimmerman, of course, coming up. He almost always did that. He didn't like climbing stairs, so he used to stick his foot into the hook at the end of the

rope, press the switch and, hanging onto the rope, get himself hauled to the top of the building. Stopping the hoist at the top, was no trick at all. As soon as the hook cleared the well at the top floor, the drum stopped revolving automatically. That was to keep any merchandise from being smashed by carelessness.

The rope was still going up, swaying a little.

For some reason Vera's heart began to beat wildly. She didn't want to look at the well, although presently she expected to see Zimmerman's massive head appearing above the level of the floor. Then she forced herself to look.

Now a head came into view. Vera's eyes grew wide. She tried to cry out but couldn't make a sound. It was as though her throat had closed up. That wasn't Zimmerman—or was it? Was it just a trick of the imagination? Was she going mad? No, that wasn't Zimmerman. Half of the figure at the end of that rope was now visible. The figure was being held in place by a sling that ran underneath its arms, and it was Meechling with his head dangling on his chest. Meechling, limp . . . and dead. Vera knew he was dead.

For seconds she stood there frozen, unable to tear her eyes away from the gruesome sight, until it had disappeared up in the darkness above. Then Vera crumpled to the floor. She had fainted.

There was the sound of heavy treads on the stairs. Zimmerman was coming up slowly.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

**THE GREATEST STORY OF MYSTERY AND ADVENTURE
OF ALL TIME**

SEVEN FOOTPRINTS TO SATAN

By A. MERRITT

Beginning in the Argosy for June 24



With clenched fists O'Connor swung around and shouted,
"He framed me yesterday and I'm not forgetting that!"

Home Are the Horses

By W. DONALDSON SMITH

They called him the Iron Man, the jockey without nerves, without fear; and that last race, while the crowd clamored for his blood, he rode madly out of one world and into another

THE two-seater had swung around the curve and was swerving right into his path before Tim O'Connor realized that the driver hadn't noticed the stop sign. In a split second two choices reared themselves before O'Connor. He could jam on the brakes and risk a skid or he could swerve toward the ditch. Tim O'Connor, the Iron Man, did neither. His legs tensed like steel, his teeth clamped together, his foot plunged down on the accelerator. The car leaped forward.

Across the silent fields, browsing in the noonday sun, the crash was as loud as the report of a gun. The screech of metal skidding over concrete had sent a whirling

mass of crows screaming into the distance before O'Connor relaxed his fingers from the wheel and stepped out of the car on to the road, his face taut as a drumskin.

Methodically, O'Connor walked all around the overturned two-seater. He lifted the door and put an exploratory hand into the interior. A girl's small, gloved hand grasped his and with a rigid arm he lifted her almost vertically from the car. He set her down on her feet and she straightened her tailored skirt, brushed tawny hair out of her grave eyes and murmured, "Thank you, Tim!"

"The pleasure," he assured her formally, "is all mine. Are you all right? You look all right—as usual."

"Thank you, but would you mind seeing if my friend is still alive? You gave us rather a bump, you know."

He bent over the car again, just in time to assist a young man as slightly built as himself and with strangely the same lean, whipcord look about him.

"Jockey Richenbach would appear to be all right, too. Let me congratulate you, James, on having such a ravishing beauty to whirl past stop signs!"

Richenbach's deepset eyes were snapping. "You're on top, O'Connor! I was paying too much attention to Ina. I didn't realize we were running into the main road."

"There was every excuse for missing the sign," O'Connor assured him blandly, his eyes smiling at the girl. He fumbled for his cigarette case, found it, then suddenly dropped it back into his pocket.

"There was every excuse, my dear James!"

Richenbach took a step forward. A muscle in his cheek was twitching.

"But there was no excuse, O'Connor, for running into us! You weren't going so fast." He pointed back at the road surface. "You didn't even skid into us. You just plowed right ahead without swerving an inch!"

"Someone give me a cigarette," the girl said hastily. Richenbach muttered that his were in the car, his eyes still on O'Connor.

"Allow me," murmured O'Connor and struck a match on the crumpled mudguard. The match blazed, flickered out. Another went the same way. The third reached the girl's cigarette. Her straight brows creased as she looked into O'Connor's eyes across the wavering flame.

"What was the idea, O'Connor? Drinking? Did you forget where the brakes were?"

O'Connor smiled. "I'm not sure that there was any idea, James. Look at the damage to my fender! You came fast out of a sideroad and a car on the main road ran into you. I should take you to court!"

"Did you put your brakes on?" Richenbach demanded doggedly.

"I really can't remember, James. How's tricks, Ina?"

The girl did not answer. She was smoking and looking at O'Connor still very thoughtfully. O'Connor caught the glance

and started to examine the damage to his car. He took hold of the fender and tensed the muscles of his arm. The steel wilted as if it was tin. Richenbach sneered.

"Pity you couldn't have used the brakes like that!"

O'Connor got into the car and backed it away from the two-seater. He put his head out of the window.

"Can I give you a lift?"

"Not on your life!" said Richenbach.

The girl hesitated, took the cigarette out of her mouth. "I think I'll wait, if you don't mind, Tim . . ."

O'Connor nodded impassively and drove off.

IN THE saddling ring the paddock judge had his eyes upon him. The stewards had their cold eyes on him as he paraded wooden-faced past the stands. Leaning on the rail of his tiny platform the starter had his eyes on him. But it wasn't those eyes that O'Connor saw. The eyes that swam before him were the sad gray ones of Ina Sinclair.

"I've done my best to get used to you risking your neck every day between two and six, tried to tell myself that it would be just one more thing in the day's work, like washing the dishes and making the bed and waiting for the postman—but I'm afraid that it won't work out like that, Tim. I'm afraid I can't face the prospect day after day and week after week and year after year."

That was what she had said, looking at him with that forlorn expression in the gray eyes. She said it in such a quiet, toneless voice that O'Connor knew she must have been thinking of saying it a long time.

He had flared up, of course. That was the trouble with him. He wasn't able to argue things coolly. Other people could always tie him into knots. He seemed to lose his head. Not that Ina was trying to tie him up. She was standing there imploring him to give up his race-riding.

"How d'you think we'll live if I give up my job?" he'd shouted. "It's just one

more way of getting bread and butter and paying the rent and going to the movies. Some people scrub floors or become president or sell brushes. I ride a horse around an oval track half a dozen times a day. That's what keeps me from pan-handling on the streets for dimes —these arms and these hands!"

Fine hands, the hands of a craftsman who worked with fine materials and yet hands with the strength of high-tensile steel. Million-dollar hands. God had given Tim O'Connor million-dollar hands and a million times Tim O'Connor had cursed the gift.

Ina had moved her own hands helplessly. "It's the way you ride. You just seem to go crazy when you get on a horse. It was a miracle you weren't killed that day at Saratoga. It's been miracles ever since."

Tim O'Connor bit his lip at that. He shot the girl a strange, almost startled glance. Then he laughed abruptly.

"Fortune favors the brave!" He faced her in sudden defiance. "I ride horses as Tim O'Connor, the Iron Man, rides 'em!" Then he added with a twist of his mouth. "Not for instance as Jimmy Richenbach rides 'em!"

Two spots of color showed just below her high cheekbones. She just looked at him, not speaking.

"Pity you chucked Richenbach over for me! Saved you having to change over again when he took my place at the top of the jockey's list!"

"I think," she had said very quietly, "you must be turning into a madman off the horses as well as on them. . . ."

A COUPLE of horses cutting out the work in front, another moving up on the outside; the old scene. The howl of the wind where before there had been no breeze; the rip and roar where there had been silence; the throb of steel biting into brown earth; the leather moist in his hands, moist in the million-dollar hands, hands which might have been made for the one purpose in all the world of guiding

thoroughbred horses around saucer tracks at forty miles per hour.

That would be Richenbach's mount, Morning Sun, coming up on the outside. The horse was barely able to last six furlongs in a fast run race. Richenbach would try to get the rail and save ground on the bend. He would come with this run on the backstretch and swing over approaching the bend and be on the inside of the curve where the yards counted. He would do that if he got those two lengths in front which the rules of racing demanded. If he did . . .

White-faced, O'Connor lay into the wind. Between horses he drove on his mount. Pharisee stretched out. The black colt, a long striding son of Phalaros, reveled in the gallop down the straight-away. Richenbach's lips moved. O'Connor could see the words forming on the twitching lips even as the thunder of hoofs swept the sound behind them. Richenbach was wondering what the game was. He knew O'Connor's mount couldn't last to the post at this pace. The money was down on Morning Sun and Richenbach had to get the rail, but they were halfway around the bend in a mad gallop before he wore down Pharisee. They were yet two furlongs from the post when Richenbach came back to O'Connor.

He came back on a beaten horse, on a horse which had been forced to make its move too soon, a horse which had left its race on the bend. Richenbach looked washed up. The Iron Man knew what that dead look meant, on the face of a jockey coming in on a heavily backed horse at the tail end of the field.

O'Connor turned his mount and came back to scale, his white face as expressionless as the furrowed earth as he weighted in. The trainer glanced at him keenly.

"Did the horse run away with you? What were you trying to do? Break the track record for the half mile?"

The Iron Man stepped off the scales. He looked, not at the trainer, but over his shoulder, to where Richenbach and a girl were walking down the track. They were

walking very slowly, with a halt every few paces and once or twice the jockey shook his head. The girl was obviously trying to persuade the jockey to take some action. The Iron Man followed slowly behind, wondering what Ina Sinclair was suggesting to Richenbach.

O'CONNOR, accustomed to receiving peremptory summons from the stewards, was surprised when this one came. In the jockeys' room he stopped, taking off the colors, pulled on an overcoat and followed the messenger. Half-way across the paddocks he saw Ina coming from the direction of the stewards' room. He would have avoided her, but she stopped in his path.

"I think," the girl told him, her face as white as his own, "that that was one of the rottenest tricks I've ever seen. The stable money was down on Jimmy's horse and you just went out to stop him winning. That's how it looked. That's what you did, isn't it?"

The Iron Man thrust her out of his way and went on. She ran after him, pulled him around.

"Did the horse bolt with you, or something like that?"

The Iron Man shook off her arm and went on toward the stewards' room. . . .

He turned an enquiring look on the group of officials. Richenbach was there already, looking like something out of a waxworks. Must have been a fortune on that horse, thought O'Connor.

"Why," asked the chairman, toying with a pencil, "were you so anxious to prevent Richenbach winning the last race?"

O'Connor's brows went up. "I thought it was the duty of every jockey in a race to stop the other jockeys winning?"

He asked the question with a troubled innocence, so that the stewards glowered at him. Then he added, "I knew of a jockey once who got into terrible trouble for assisting another jockey instead of trying to make things harder for him!"

The chairman drew in his breath, but he kept his voice even. "It so happens that

Richenbach has laid a charge against you, O'Connor!"

"A charge?" O'Connor's heart beat faster. The Iron Man could not stand many more charges being laid against him.

"Richenbach accuses you of fouling him on the bend and seizing hold of his saddle cloth."

"The rats!" said the Iron Man under his breath.

Disliked by the average racegoer, feared by owners, hated by the book-makers, Carl Anthony smiled his depressing smile and said little. Carl was digging his garden when the Iron Man strolled along. He glanced up as he heard the gate click, then went on digging.

"Warned off yet?" he enquired without straightening his back when O'Connor wandered up.

O'Connor grinned over his bent back. "Tomorrow, after the first race. The enquiry's adjourned until then. It's adjourned mainly so that the secretary can get together a list of my past sins, so that the stewards can have something like a complete picture before them. Not quite complete, of course. You couldn't expect any secretary to keep track of all my crimes. Still, he'll collect enough to make sure of the verdict before I go into the room. I'm through."

"Good!"

"Your solicitude touches me!"

"I'd be sorry to see you break your neck on the track."

The Iron Man creased his brows. "I had no idea you were capable of such sentiment."

"Bad business for the track, neck breaking!"

"I get you! Here's something else to delight you. I'm riding my last race on one of your sleepers."

Carl turned over a spadeful of earth, glanced up at O'Connor out of the corner of his eye.

"What's the game?"

"Does the sleeper go on sleeping tomorrow?"

Something that was almost a smile crossed Carl's dried-up features. "My horses get awfully sleepy under weights that they think are too big!"

"Do you think," enquired the Iron Man gravely, "that Sierra Leone will consider his weight too much to bear in the first race tomorrow?"

"I think he wants another couple of pounds off before he wakens up. Say the next race after the one tomorrow."

"The next race will be as good as the next century to me."

Carl straightened up suddenly. "What are you going to do—gamble?"

From his pocket the Iron Man took a slip of paper. He had not made a great amount of money in his five years on the turf. He had ridden straight, never made money out of horses that lost and many a time he had ridden a horse for a small owner when he could have been on a winner for a big stable. That was loyalty; but it did not make money.

"I've made out this check to you for two thousand dollars. That's all I've got except ninety-six dollars. I was going to ask you to get me the best odds you could against Sierra Leone."

"I don't like gambling!" Carl shook his head. "Another couple of pounds off and it would be an investment."

"I can't wait. Tomorrow's the last time I ride. Richenbach put the frame around me today . . . and there's no getting out of that frame. Not with my past for the picture!"

O'Connor tapped the bent shoulders, handed the slip of paper to the trainer. "I'll be through tomorrow after the first race. I can't wait a week. Get the best price you can to two thousand."

Methodically Carl stowed the check away in a pocket. "Okay, Mr. Iron Man! You've played a square game with me, even if you have set me cursing with some of your crazy rides. You can have this all to yourself—I'll not bet. He should start at twenties at least if the money doesn't

get back to the track, and I can fix that. But remember," said Carl Anthony and looked at the Iron Man very sadly, "he wasn't quite ready to waken."

"I'll remember," said the Iron Man.

SLOWLY he drove and the warm sun beat down and the tar oozed from the edges of the road and over all was the languor of noon. The Iron Man went slowly for in the world he had known this was his last journey. He would be driving again down this road two or three hours from now and behind him the world of racing would be heaving on the hectic tenor of its way and before him the miles would be unfolding into wider horizons or narrowing into dead-end lanes. It was only a matter of hours now.

There was another car already in the corner of the park when O'Connor drove in. His eyes rested on it, then he carefully locked the door of his own car and sauntered across.

Richenbach looked uneasy, but Ina met the Iron Man's half smiling gaze calmly. The smile grew more pronounced as he saw the pulse beating in the girl's throat.

"You look," said the Iron Man genially, "as if you were going to a funeral instead of a celebration!"

They said nothing. The Iron Man leaned confidentially on the doorsill.

"You know, there are various kinds of rats in this world. There are rats that attack you in the daylight and there are rats that go after a man in the dark. I think you two belong to the dark."

Still they said nothing, just sitting there and staring up at him and the Iron Man stared down and the smile never left his face.

"A long time ago," the Iron Man told them in a smooth voice, "a boy was in love with a girl and he thought the girl was in love with him and they were going to get married—until he lost his place at the top of the jockeys' list."

O'Connor shook his head sadly. "That was a very foolish thing for him to do. He not only lost his place but he lost his

girl too. She started to tell him how he wasn't riding like good little boys should and how she couldn't go with him anymore if he didn't do better. But he did worse and another boy took his place at the top and, lo and behold, if the girl didn't fall in love with this boy too! A most amazing creature—a girl who always fell in love with the top place on the jockeys' list!"

O'Connor shook his head again and shrugged his shoulders in a resigned gesture. Still the pair in the car said nothing.

"Of course," said O'Connor, "you couldn't expect a girl to go on changing around every week or so, so she said to the new love, why don't you make yourself a fixture up there at the top? There's only that dope O'Connor to worry about and he's got such a bad name that you could hang him with a rotten bootlace. So it happened that the jockey at the top framed the jockey who was chasing him. Nice rats, weren't they?"

The Iron Man smiled down at them a long time, then strolled off toward the owners' and trainers' entrance.

CARL ANTHONY was morose. He didn't mind the Iron Man picking one of his plums, for the Iron Man had put many into the basket for him in five years of riding, but he did mind one of those plums being picked before it was quite ready to fall. Carl groaned with all the anguish of an artist.

"Inside the next five minutes a hundred bucks will be put on Sierra Leona's nose in each of twenty cities," he told O'Connor when the Iron Man, in the black and white silks, came into the saddling ring, "and inside twelve minutes there will be twenty bookies a hundred bucks the richer. This is going to be such a disgrace! They'll say old Carl made a mistake at last!"

The Iron Man only grinned. He could afford to grin now. The die was cast, the time for soul searching over. It was all very simple and straightforward now.

"Twenty to one on the board," Carl

muttered, standing on tip-toe to see over the heads of the people clustering around the ring. "Nice odds to two thousand—if they could be landed!"

"What's the danger?" the Iron Man asked, leaning negligently against the white side of the stall.

"Richenbach on Cardinal's King. Seven to five. He should do it."

The Iron Man whistled. Into his eyes there came the last light of battle. Good! His last engagement would be fought with Richenbach as the enemy. He could have wished for nothing more.

Carl straightened up from cleaning the dirt out of the horse's hoofs and shut his knife with a snap.

"How're you going to ride this horse?"

"Get off in front and stay there?" the Iron Man suggested tentatively.

Carl gnawed his lip. "Mebbe they won't let you stay there. They know he ain't too good a stayer and they'll likely fight you for the lead if you do that. You'd best not move too soon or he'll die under you. You'd best not move too late or he'll sulk."

"Swell ride!" commented the Iron Man.

"I told you!"

The paddock judge was looking at his watch. "It's not as much as twenties ag'in you," Carl conceded, "but you're on no hot-shot. He's been woked too early. It's three or four to one ag'in you properly, but these people don't know that. You've got that much the best of it, but it won't matter how much the best of it you've got if you don't get first past the post. I guess you'd best keep well up with the pace and save all the ground you can and make your move half way up the stretch and pray to God to hold th' advantage. It won't be easy. He'll be wanting to quit on you and Cardinal's King will be coming like a bat out o' hell!"

"I don't like riding a waiting race," the Iron Man muttered, with a worried frown.

Carl laughed shortly. "You don't need to tell us that! There's not many on this track today can remember you ever riding

a waiting race. It's hell for leather from start to finish with the Iron Man! But it so happens that today it's not the kind of race you like to ride that matters—it's the kind of race that you've *got* to ride. If you want to be in at the death."

"Riders up!" called out the paddock judge.

"Cardinal's King's a'going to catch you twenty yards from the post," said Carl Anthony finally. "That's what's a'going to happen."

Carl heaved the Iron Man into the saddle, took hold of his booted leg and squeezed it in a surprising gesture. The abstract gaze of the Iron Man locked momentarily with the sadly prophetic one of the old trainer.

"Good hunting, laddie!"

Gravely the Iron Man raised his whip in salute. The trainer released the bridle. Over infield and paddock the bugle shrilled.

"The last post," said the Iron Man to Sierra Leone.

THE lights were blazing a twenty-five against the number seven of his mount as the Iron Man paraded past the tote. The judges were in their box, he saw their flinty gaze upon him. With never the blink of an eye the Iron Man gazed straight between the ears of the black colt. The lights flashed another figure. Thirty to one against Sierra Leone.

Ahead of him, number six in the file, walked the even-money favorite, Cardinal's King. Richenbach turned his head once and gave the Iron Man a measured look just as they started to go slowly around the bend. The Iron Man met the glance with a grin. If he was going out in this race he would scare the wits out of them in the going. He wouldn't be able to help that.

The starter, lips pursed, gave him a long stare as he came leisurely up to the gate. The Iron Man nodded with affable serenity. He had never cared much for starters and stewards and judges. Now he didn't care a damn for a bushel of

them. Another few minutes and they would be as far out of his life as Ina.

Sierra Leone was drawn seventh from the rail in a field of nine. That fact caused the Iron Man more uneasiness than the starter's grim look. Richenbach was inside of him. That was bad. . . .

Like a rocket the Iron Man left the gate. He laughed hysterically as he went. Two thousand at thirty to one! Come on you lazy dog!

Sierra Leone stretched out down the backstretch while O'Connor made no attempt to get him under wraps. The face of the Iron Man was starkly white, his eyes burning with a wild light as they thundered for the bend. Dimly he wondered what Carl Anthony would be saying on the stand. He'd told him to ride a waiting race and here he was making every post a winning one. There would be swearing on the stand—but this was his funeral, not Carl Anthony's.

He didn't know how far Cardinal's King was behind and he didn't care. He saw only the brown track before him and two thousand dollars and a thirty and a thousand miles of ocean and the faces of a strange people and the end of one trail and the beginning of another. The eyes of the Iron Man were focussed ahead and the past was dead behind him, as he hurtled around the bend.

A thousand times had the Iron Man come up the stretch, but never had he ridden with the wild abandon of this last time of all. The Iron Man was fighting for forty or fifty or sixty years over the space of four hundred yards. A lifetime at stake in a quarter mile. At twenty-three Tim O'Connor had time to start out on the road again—if he could keep Sierra Leone in front of the pack.

Madly on the rail the Iron Man rode and behind him Richenbach on Cardinal's King came out from the pack and the scales were balanced.

And now the Iron Man felt suddenly sick as he sensed Sierra Leone faltering under him. This was no smasher on which he went out to his last tilt with fortune.

This was a cheap horse, a horse which had a reputation for quitting. "He'll catch you a sixteenth from the post," had said Carl Anthony in the paddock and now, two sixteenths out, the Iron Man knew with all the instinct of the born horseman that Carl had gauged it to the yard. Sierra Leone was going to be caught and it was Richenbach who was going to catch him.

The Iron Man snarled in his throat. Richenbach to do it! Richenbach, framing him, smashing the present for him yesterday, smashing the future for him today. The Iron Man snarled as he lay crouching into the wind.

Gradually, almost imperceptibly, the Iron Man got his right hand and his left knee to work. The knee pressed inwards, the hand pulled outwards. Sierra Leone started to bear out from the rail.

The Iron Man did not look around. He kept his eyes ahead as Sierra Leone headed slightly away from the rail, listening as a conductor might listen to his orchestra, to pick from the pulsing air the one sound that would get him home in front.

O'Connor's mouth twitched. There it was. The eyes of the Iron Man were like slits. Knees and hands moved again, but this time it was the right knee that pressed and the left hand that pulled. Sierra Leone came back to the rails and the shriek of a man in mortal terror rose above even the thunder of the crowd.

The Iron Man did not need to look back. He knew what had happened. Richenbach had tried to come through on the rail and the opening had become a dead end. Richenbach had run into a blind switch.

Dimly, as if far away, the Iron Man heard a crash behind him. Cardinal's King was down. With never a glance behind him, inscrutable and passive of face, the Iron Man drove Sierra Leone first past the post.

THE crowd howled at him. Ten thousand people rose in their seats and shook their fists at him. They hooted and

screamed and swore, and as he turned to bring the winner back to scale, hysterical men and women fought the police to get at him. The Iron Man smiled imperturbably. He saluted the howling people with his whip. The roar split the sky.

In the midst of the uproar Carl met him in the winner's circle. For the first time in his life, Carl looked scared. The Iron Man grinned at him. Carl shot a glance over his shoulder toward a crowd that was gathering on the track a sixteenth below the winning post. The Iron Man didn't look that way.

"You haven't a chance of keeping the race," Carl muttered as O'Connor unsaddled the horse. "And he started at forty to one. Forty to one to two thousand! And you haven't a snowball's chance of keeping it!"

The Iron Man was tugging viciously at the straps now. "He was catching me. I couldn't have won, anyway. It comes to the same thing."

"Richenbach might be seriously injured . . ."

"Yeh! He injured me yesterday—seriously!"

O'Connor stepped on the scales. The pointer swung around to the hundred and fourteen mark. "All right!" snapped the clerk of the scales and spat.

O'Connor handed the saddle to a valet. "They're betting five to one against you keeping the race!" the valet informed him with a gloating smile.

"I wouldn't take fifties!" said the Iron Man and went to get his license.

After the pandemonium outside, the silence of the stewards' room struck O'Connor like a blow. The chairman motioned him to sit down. The Iron Man didn't understand this. The stewards just sat still, looking at him. Then five minutes later there came a knock at the door and Richenbach entered with a bandage around his forehead and a dazed look in his eyes and O'Connor understood the cause of the delay. There came an audible sigh of relief from the group of stewards.

"I propose," said the chairman, "that

before we take up the enquiry where we left off yesterday, we consider the smash in the last race. After that it might not be necessary to go any further!"

They asked the Iron Man if he had anything to say and the Iron Man sneered. There was savage ferocity in that sneer—the look of a man who has lost a dream and welcomes the hatred of the whole world.

"What the hell does it matter what I say? There's the stooge sitting there ready to swear black's white if he can get me out of here. Go on! I fooled you in today's race, didn't I? I edged out from the rail and you started to come through and then I heard you coming and I swung back again and you were damned lucky to get off with your life. That's what I did! One of the lousiest tricks a jockey can pull on the tracks. Go on, tell them and make it short. I want to get out. Did I or didn't I do that?"

Richenbach put his hands behind his back as if to hide their trembling.

"You did not!" he said.

O'CONNOR'S mouth dropped open. His gaze froze itself on the stewards as if imploring them to help him get this clear. With his feet apart to steady himself, Richenbach spoke in a whisper that was almost a shout, so still was the room.

"It was my own fault. I misjudged the thing. The opening wasn't big enough to come through and I thought it was. I should have come on the outside. I took a chance and I lost out—that's all."

"You damn fool!" screamed the Iron Man, "I made that opening big enough to drive a farm wagon through. I made it wide as hell to bring you on, you damn fool!"

"The opening wasn't big enough. It was my own fault."

The faces of the stewards were as stupefied as the Iron Man's. "Are you telling the truth, the solemn truth, Richenbach?" the chairman asked very quietly.

"I am."

The chairman sat back and stared at his colleagues in perplexity. "I don't know what we can do—if Richenbach swears he was to blame for the smash, what can we do?"

He picked up the phone and called the number-board attendants. "Signal the 'Official'. Sierra Leone keeps the race."

The hiss of the Iron Man's sucked-in breath sounded all over the room. Huge figures danced before his eyes, figures that meant wealth and affluence and comfort and security for the rest of his life. The figures faded, the dim shape of Richenbach remained. The dazed look went out of the eyes of the Iron Man and one of cold hatred enveloped Richenbach. Richenbach shifted his position, as if bracing himself to deliver another thunderbolt.

O'Connor's stare smoked with acid, his lips warped into a snarl. But Richenbach plunged ahead, unseeing.

"And there is something else. I framed O'Connor yesterday. He didn't bear out from the rail. He didn't seize hold of the saddle cloth. He rode fairly enough."

The chairman had got past the stage of bewilderment. "Why are you telling us all this, Richenbach? What has happened overnight?"

Richenbach looked away, closed his mouth. But the Iron Man took a step forward. His cheeks seemed to have sunk in the last minute. In the last minute Tim O'Connor had discovered that he wanted not money but something that money could not obtain.

He even wondered in his tautened brain why the other had seemed so all-important a moment before, so trivial now. He couldn't say.

"I'll tell you why he's being a good little boy," the Iron Man said harshly. "There's a girl and we're both in love with her and I thought she'd put Richenbach up to framing me. I was wrong. She must have been persuading Richenbach the other way. But Richenbach framed me to make sure of putting me out of the picture and now she's kicking about

it and he's going to get the inside track again by nobly confessing and putting me in the clear. He hands me the race and he gets the race. Swell saw-off, gentlemen!"

With clenched fists he swung around on Richenbach. "But it won't work! He framed me yesterday and I'm not forgetting that!"

THE stewards waited patiently for Richenbach, and Richenbach laughed bitterly and spoke as if to himself.

"I guess it's hopeless! I told her that, but she loved him too darned crazily to see it." He shrugged his shoulders and not one of them knew what the shrug meant. "All right, O'Connor! If you want it you can have it. I'm through. I was a fool to let her persuade me, but I loved her too crazily too! Okay, O'Connor! You're too far gone to be saved. You're going to get it some day and I guess you might as well have it now as later."

He turned to the stewards. "Yesterday I was driving to the track with the girl. We went through a stop sign. O'Connor was coming up the main road. He crashed right into us."

"What has that to do with us?" the chairman demanded.

"Wait a moment! Either that driver wanted to kill us or he was drunk or he had lost his head. I reckoned it was the first reason—the Iron Man hasn't been too careful on the tracks! But the girl wouldn't have that. And he wasn't drunk."

Richenbach glanced at the Iron Man out of the corner of his eye. "The girl started to think back. She remembered the time when O'Connor started to ride like a maniac. It was after the spill at Saratoga. She puts the pieces together—the flaring temper, the hysterical outbursts, the crazy live-wire tension of the man. He's riding as if he doesn't care whether he gets killed or maimed any moment. The bell rings and he tears away like a madman. The man without fear! The man without nerves! Do you get it?"

The Iron Man put out a hand to the table to steady himself and turned a working face to Richenbach. But Richenbach shook his head.

"I'm going through with it. Gentlemen, the nerve of Tim O'Connor snapped that day at Saratoga. It snapped forever. You've heard of people's nerve going after a shock, like being trapped in a mine or submarine or something like that? That's what happened to O'Connor, only he managed to keep it from everyone by playacting. He became the man without nerves, the man who cared for nothing on this earth, the Iron Man!"

O'Connor's shoulders jerked.

Richenbach laughed without mirth. "He should have kept a thousand miles away from a racetrack. But he had no money saved and he'd fallen in love with a girl, and riding horses was the only thing he could do. So what does he do? He closes his eyes and goes hell for leather, like a man rushing headlong through the dark because he's terrified of it.

"He puts on an act to cover up the reason for the mad rides. Swaggering about, arrogant, sneering at everyone, building up the legend of the Iron Man and soon he's the most hated man ever to ride the American tracks. The Iron Man! He should have been in a sanitarium since Saratoga!"

Richenbach stopped. The Iron Man was standing quite still now, holding on to the table.

"And the framing . . .?"

Richenbach glared at them. "Good grief, gentlemen," he exploded, "do I have to draw you a blueprint—"

"The girl had to get him off the tracks. She'd tried before, even when she didn't know what had happened to him, just knew that he was going to kill himself if he kept on riding like a madman. That, gentlemen, is why I framed the Iron Man. . . ."

"Just one thing before you go, Richenbach," said the chairman at last. There was no need to ask O'Connor if the

story was true. The Iron Man, holding on to the table with one hand, his license crushed in the other, stood as if stripped. He didn't even have his crazy toughness left to use for a shield against the prying world.

"Just one thing, Richenbach. Do you still declare that O'Connor did not interfere with you in the stretch today?"

Richenbach's eyes flickered. He bit his lip. He looked out of the window. He looked at the broken Iron Man.

"He didn't interfere with me," said Richenbach.

On the top of the steps outside the stewards' room Richenbach held out his hand.

"Give me that license to kill yourself,

Mr. Iron Man! You've earned a reprieve . . ."

He pried O'Connor's nerveless fingers from the bedraggled piece of paper. He looked at it for a moment and he went on down the steps and gave it to the girl who had been waiting the last half hour at the bottom.

From the top of the steps the Iron Man looked down and the girl looked up, facing each other, without sign, without words, at the close of one world, in the beginning of another. Richenbach put the license into the girl's hand, squeezed her arm, and walked on.

Slowly the girl's fingers started to tear the paper into little pieces. The fingers opened, the pieces drifted one by one into the wind.

The Iron Man started to come down the steps.

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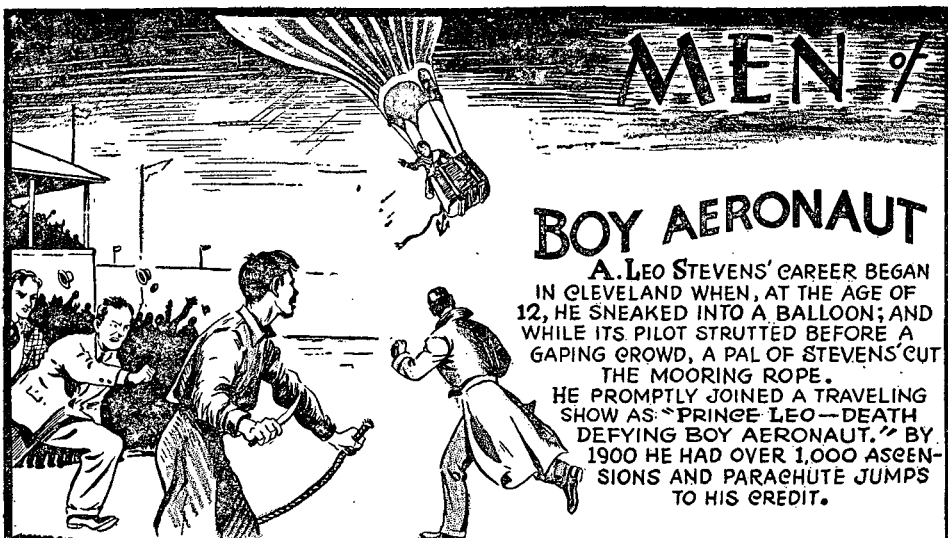
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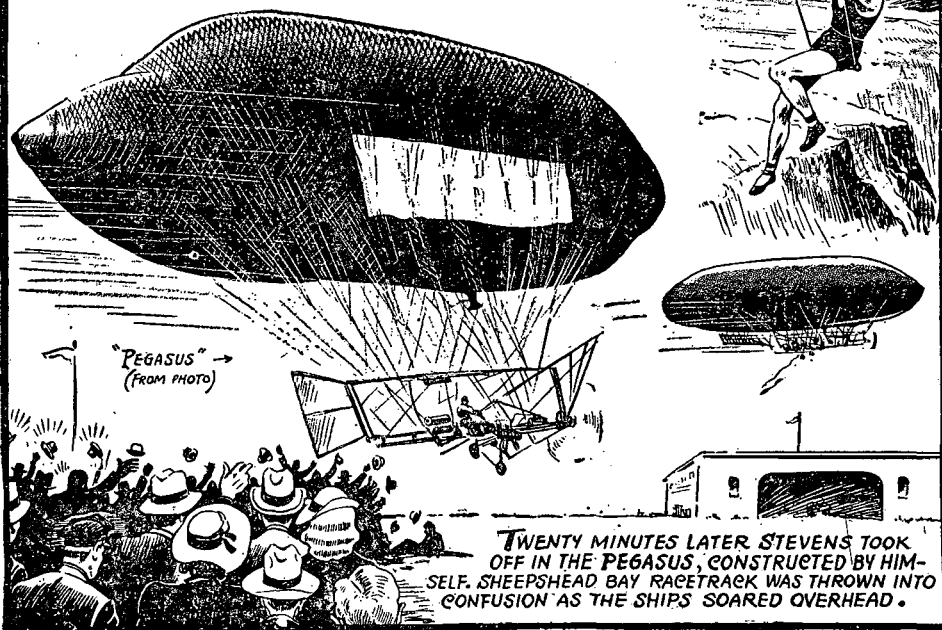
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I

THERE were five of us going mule-back through the narrow jungle lane—a Scandinavian professor and his wife, a writer out for atmosphere on the fruit-boat's run, Clyde Morley, and myself.

Morley was the only one of us actually going somewhere.

The writer and Mr. and Mrs. Scandinavia were only sightseeing at cheap tourist's rates. I'm an accountant and was making the yearly rounds of the

North American Fruit Company's ports. I had made my stop back in the town, where I'd gone over the books beside a screened window looking out over the blue Caribbean. Now I was sightseeing too, taking a little jaunt into the jungle before going out on the fruit-boat again in late afternoon.

But Morley was to work here, and was simply going in to his job. He was a banana herder for North American Fruit, and was coming to a new stand far into the jungle after six months' leave up north. Morley had said he'd guide us

to a picturesque spot half an hour out of the fruit company town. There, he'd go on his way. A Jamaican black, at the moment trailing a little behind us, would guide us back again.

I wish I'd paid more attention to Morley's looks and actions on that ride. But I didn't, any more than I had on the boat down. He was a middle-aged man, very thin, with a sallow face and dull, suffering brown eyes. He stayed by himself, rarely had anything to say. He acted almost as a man might who was very ill; yet there seemed to be nothing definitely wrong with his health.

About all I noted on that ride, was that Morley rode along with his eyes half closed and his head back as if he were staring unseeingly at the treetops. Once I saw that his fists were clenched.

I thought, vaguely, that the attitude might have either of two very different meanings. He could have hated the jungle and be riding into it now, after six months' civilization, like a man going back into hell. Or he could have loved it inarticulately and be greeting it with half-closed eyes and taut body as a man greets a woman he loves.

However, I thought all too little about Morley, the banana herder coming here to his jungle stand. The scene around me was too fascinating.

Huge trees, great palms, a sea of greenery into which you could see for less than twenty yards on any side. Now a muddy river with gray-green alligators basking on the bank. Now a burst of orchids twenty feet up on a huge tree-trunk.

WE GOT to an open glade in the jungle almost like a well-kept little park. Something in the soil kept the vegetation from crowding head-high in impenetrable thickets. I don't know what it was, but the result was delightful.

Morley stared at us without seeing us. His eyes, dull and suffering, are with me yet.

"This is the place I had in mind," he

mumbled. His face looked as yellow as sulphur. I saw that the Jamaican at our rear was staring at him curiously, almost fearfully. "I'll go on . . . I . . . about fifteen kilometers . . ."

His voice faltered to a stop. Slowly, he got off his mule. We were all watching him now. Suddenly his eyes were no longer dull. They were feverishly bright, and seemed red instead of brown.

What happened then was as impossible as horrible, as it was utterly unexpected.

At the side of the little open glade there was a low cliff of crumbling brown rock. It was almost like a man-made stone wall, rotting from age. Morley stared at the rock.

"All right," he said, in a tone so low that I don't think any one heard it but me. "All right, damn you."

He began to walk toward the wall. Then he began to dog-trot.

"Say! What—" began the writer, a gangling young fellow with protruding blue eyes.

The wife of the Scandinavian professor gasped, and her husband cried out.

Morley had gone into a full run from the dog-trot. Right at the cliff. Full speed, like a man in a furious burst of energy just before the take-off of a broad-jump. Fifteen feet from the low cliff he rocketed from his feet in a furious, flat dive, straight at the stone.

Head first, body as straight and rigid in the air as a thrown lance, arms held tightly at his sides—he struck.

I thought I heard the sound of his head hitting the rock. Like a melon dropped on a tile floor. But I know I couldn't have. The professor's wife screamed—one long piercing agony of sound that lasted as long as she had breath. The professor was making hoarse, gagging sounds. The writer and I were swearing without knowing it, under our breaths.

Only the Jamaican was the same now as he had been before the appalling, head-long dive. He was staring at Morley's body with eyes curious and fearful—but not at all surprised.

The jungle had held its breath during the woman's long scream. It picked up when she stopped. A billion insects buzzed impersonally, the green ocean around us whispered in the wind, birds shrilled discordantly.

"We shall go back with him, sar?" the Jamaican said to me. There was no expression in his voice. His face was an ebony mask.

I nodded, moistened my lips to say something, couldn't, and just nodded again. We loaded the thing that had been Morley onto his mule, and went back, with the professor riding next to his wife and keeping his arm around her as she swayed in the saddle.

BACK at the fruit-company town, with the green jungle on one side and the blue sea on the other, there was horror but no surprise.

"My God, he did it," said Lacey, the division manager, when I'd told haltingly of the man's dive head-first against the wall.

He took a bottle from his desk drawer and poured into two glasses with a trembling hand. I gulped my portion and hardly tasted it. Sweat was running down my face in rivers, and it wasn't all the heat.

"Why," I said in shaking indignation, "did the company have a man that old down here? I thought they sent young men to the outposts? Morley couldn't stand it at his age. He faced a prospect of two or three more years in the jungle before getting north again, couldn't stick the prospect, and killed himself. The company should know better."

Lacey turned a sun-reddened face toward me curiously.

"A man that old?" he echoed. "How old do you think Morley is, anyway?"

I looked at the sallow, wretched face with the dull, suffering eyes that was floating before me when I closed my eyelids. The throat under the face had been wrinkled and thin, the hair over it thin and gray and lifeless.

"Fifty-five, I'd say," I ventured, with

the contempt for age of a man of twenty-eight.

Lacey poured more whisky.

"He was about your own age. Twenty-nine."

"What?"

"He was twenty-nine."

I tried to digest that. And couldn't. That old-looking man twenty-nine? Only a year older than I myself?

"He wasn't too old to take the tropics," said Lacey. "And he didn't die because he hated them. He was killed by something from within the jungle. Something no white man will ever understand, no matter how long he lives down here."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

Lacey's sun-inflamed eyes stared into mine. He shrugged, finally. "You're going down to Porta Christe, aren't you?" he said, mentioning the next fruit company port down the coast.

I nodded.

"All right," said Lacey, "when you get there, ask for Thompson. He's a herder upriver from Porta Christe. Morley worked under him as checker when he first came down here. And it was in Thompson's territory that this thing happened to Morley."

"What thing?" I said.

Lacey poured a third drink, and took it like water.

"Talk to Thompson," he repeated, "if you're rash enough to want to dig into something that ought to be left alone. You may get him to talk. You won't get anything from me. You'll be going back to the home office in a few more weeks. I don't want you to report me as crazy."

He was obviously through talking. At the rickety dock, the boat's whistle blasted twice: I got up and went out.

Morley's body lay under a canvas in a spare storeroom off the general office. It would have to be buried soon, in this heat, couldn't be shipped north. His feet stuck up under one end of the rough shroud. At the other end you could make out the vague outline of the head. But the body seemed to have no neck.

WIPING at my streaming face, I went on out into the battering sunlight. The Jamaican who had guided us back was there. He started to move away when he saw me. I caught his arm.

"Sar?" he said with blank politeness.

"Why did he do it?" I said, hearing my voice almost as someone else's.

"Sar?" said the Jamaican.

"You were half expecting him to do something like that. Your face showed it. You know something about the man. Why did he do that . . . thing?"

"I know nothing, sar," the black said. "He come from adown the coast. This is my first I see him."

"You know something. What happened to him down the coast?"

"Sar?"

"I'm leaving now," I said. "I may never come back. At the very least, I won't be back for another year. It is safe to talk to me. And I want to know."

The black looked around, without seeming to.

"The great green serpent," he said.

"What?"

"The great green serpent kill him. All know him die soon."

"I don't understand! You mean a snake, in some way—"

The Jamaican tugged from my grasp and was gone. I could not have caught him again without running.

I went on to the boat, where a red-eyed woman and a white-faced professor and a shaky writer stood at the rail. Thompson, at the next port, knew something, according to Lacey. Well, I'd ask him.

And that started the most curious trail a man has ever followed.

I had seen a man who looked fifty-five, but was incredibly only twenty-nine, kill himself in about the most horrible way in which you can take your own life. Something in his background had made him do it. I had to know what.

I became a collector. A collector, not of matchboxes or china or guns—but of facts about Morley. As accountant for

the company that had also employed him, sooner or later my trail was almost bound to cross every spot he'd been in the last two years. At each of these spots I questioned those who had known Morley, and added to my collection. Morleyana, you might have called the accumulation.

Some of the things I didn't learn for six months or more, some I picked up fairly soon after the hideous thing I'd seen. I didn't get the links of the chain in any kind of order, and I still haven't sorted them out chronologically. Above all, I haven't tried to come to a conclusion about them. I'm just going to present the things I learned and let you do your own sorting out and your own deducing in this mad, terrible account of Morley—and the great green serpent.

II

THOMPSON, working out of Portau Christe, came in on the narrow-gauge before I'd left port. I'd expected a big man, for no particular reason. Thompson wasn't big. He was small and wizened, as though the tropics had squeezed him and turned him around and squeezed again till there was only fiber and rind left of him with no juice at all.

"Morley?" he said cautiously. "Yes, he worked under me awhile ago."

News of what Morley had done had penetrated here ahead of me. I don't know how. The boat I'd come on was the fastest means of communication between the two ports as far as white man's knowledge could tell. Which seemed to indicate that the news had traveled through the jungle by some means a little outside of white man's knowledge.

I'd finished my accounting in the office. Thompson had turned in his report and had nothing to do till such time as he chose to take the narrow-gauge back to his banana stand. I got him to the fly-specked port bar and oiled his reluctant tongue with liquor. It took over a pint of oiling, which was a testimony either to an unbelievable capacity, or to

frightened hesitation at even mentioning Morley's name. I couldn't tell which.

He looked at me somberly, after a while. "You know, you're a fool," he said.

I smiled. "Admitted. Who of us is not? But why, at the moment, am I being a fool?"

"For stirring up a mud-puddle like this," he said. "If you had any sense you wouldn't try to probe into Morley's doings down here. Because you might find out—too much."

"I don't get you."

Thompson's somber gaze went over me again. "You're pretty healthy. Stay that way. There are some things no man should know, and some forces a man shouldn't tangle with."

He was being pretty obscure, and, I thought, rather silly. I kept after him. And finally he talked, a little.

Morley had come to Porta Christe, new to the tropics, three years ago. At twenty-six, he'd been six feet tall, weighed a hundred and ninety, and could hold a man off the ground with one hand. He was a laughing, heedless kid, Thompson indicated. (His morbid gaze wordlessly intimated that I was rather heedless myself.) But he didn't stay that way long. He got surly, over-authoritative, as the sun broiled him. Some men get that way in the jungle, even though their bodies aren't hurt by the terrific rays.

Morley was straw-boss over the men, in his position as time-keeper and checker, with Thompson overseeing the whole stand. Morley was ambitious, he wanted to leave here and get a stand of his own as soon as possible, so he rode the men hard to get out a record number of stems.

THE men were mainly Jamaican blacks, and there seemed to be a limit to the amount of riding they'd take. And every once in a while a lot of the black boys simply wouldn't show up for a day.

Morley smoldered and fumed and was more and more infuriated by this as the time for his first six-months leave up north came around. He wanted to come back

from that vacation to his own stand; and he was pushing that record. He kept poking around among the blacks, trying to find out where they went on those occasional days off without leave. He said if he ever found out he'd break up their loafing spot with his bare hands. None of the boys would say anything, even when he went a little too far and cracked a few heads in his persistence.

Thompson himself took a hand, there.

"Look," he said, "nothing has ever been even whispered about it, but I have a kind of idea what goes on, now and then. And I'd keep my bill out of it, if I were you. I always have, and I've been down here eight years."

"What goes on?" said Morley belligerently.

"Ever hear of voodoo?"

Morley just stared at Thompson with his mouth open, and then laughed.

"He laughed," Thompson said resentfully to me as he drained another glass, "like a damned hyena. Well, he's feeding the palm roots now."

Morley said he'd voodoo the black so-and-so's if he ever found where they went when they were supposed to be getting out stems and loading them on the narrow-gauge. So Thompson protested again.

"Would you," he said, "go into a church and break the altar and knock down the parson and chivy the church-goers around because you wanted them to come out and do some work on Sunday morning?"

"Why, that's blasphemy!" said Morley. "Comparing a two-bit, crazy superstitious cult to our own religion!"

Thompson scratched his head. "Maybe it is. I don't know. But it's a good comparison. Voodoo to these boys is the most serious thing in life. Let it alone."

Morley laughed angrily again, in what must have been a maddening way to this little man who was after all his superior. He repeated what he'd do if he ever found where the black boys loafed when they should be working.

"And then," said Thompson, staring at his glass, "he found the place. That was

about three weeks before he was due to go north on the fruit boat."

Stems on the banana trees that had to be picked before they ripened any more. Stems head-high along the narrow-gauge to be loaded in a hurry for the next boat. And a third of the boys turned up missing that morning.

"Morley was like a wild man," said Thompson. "Yet, you must understand, he was decent enough, really. The sun had tied his temper in knots. He wasn't quite sane by the end of his first stretch down here. And he had this obsession: no matter what he told the men, they left at their own pleasure anyhow. It was a direct insult to his authority; and you've got to keep your authority intact in the tropics."

Morley raged around, using his fists on the men who hadn't deserted, found out nothing. Then he saw a strange sign on a shed wall. There was a straight line, a rough circle, another straight line at a different angle, and a crudely drawn eye.

It was a voodoo sign, a directing chart to where a meeting was being held. He'd seen a similar sign before, but this was the first that, in his knowledge of the country around, he could decipher.

Go northwest to a certain pool in the jungle. From there, veer a few degrees west and go to a strange rock outcropping called the serpent's eye.

IN BREATHLESS silence the blacks watched him stare at the grim sign. In silence they watched him start along the jungle trail to the pool, fists knotted, face dark red with a fury that was not really his but was a child of the unaccustomed sun that kept baking his brains.

"I'd have stopped him," said Thompson, "but I wasn't around. I went right after him as soon as I got back and heard where he was headed. I was hoping I could catch him before he'd got to the end of the trail."

I broke in on him here.

"You have seen these signs?" I said.

"Oh, yes," nodded Thompson. "Many times. I've been down here quite a while."

"They've made sense to you?"

"Once in a while. Not often. Usually they're so crudely drawn that only a native can tell from them where the meeting place is."

"You've been able to read some of them," I said, "but you've never tried to go along the designated trail yourself? That sounds as if you know more about this voodoo stuff than you admit—and don't like what you know."

"Mister," said Thompson, glaring at me, "I don't know a thing about it. I don't *want* to know. I'm telling you, things happen to white men who try to mess in jungle black man's affairs."

I subsided, and he went on, under pressure.

"I didn't get to Morley in time," he mumbled. "He found the place first. I guess he'd been lying there a half an hour before I came along."

A rock outcropping called, for no known reason, the serpent's eye. A shallow, high cave under it. . . .

"Remember," Thompson said to me, "I'm just telling you what I saw. I have no intention of investigating it, or drawing any conclusions from it. I figure it's none of my business." His voice was curiously loud, as if he were addressing someone besides me. It sank again, almost to inaudibility, as he described the scene.

In the cave was a slab of rock, like a table. The slab was as messy as a butcher's block. There was a fresh chicken's head, dripping with blood. There were the entrails of some animal, with an ancient, obsidian-bladed knife beside them. A withered heart was on the slab, and also a lot of blood that seemed to have no reason for existence, since the entrails and chicken head couldn't account for it.

On the floor near the mouth of the cave lay Morley. He was unconscious, breathing hard as a man does with a fractured skull. Only there was no mark on his head, or, indeed, anywhere else on him.

But the really serious thing was another body, lying at the side of the low rock slab. This was a withered-up black man

in nothing but a breech-clout, who had white hair. And when they have white hair in that section, they're *old*. The black man was dabbled with blood from the waist up—not his own. He was dead, with a lump on his jaw and with his head turned clear around on his shoulders.

The story was plain enough. Morley had charged in here, clean out of his mind for the moment. He had scattered the blacks from hell to breakfast, and then actually struck their high priest—the withered old master of voodoo witchcraft. Such an old man. No one, probably, was more surprised than Morley when the frail neck snapped with the blow to the jaw.

Thompson jumped to Morley's side and bent down. He leaped back. A green snake, not very big, streaked from beside Morley's unconscious body and whisked into a rock hole before Thompson could even see what kind it was. He bent over Morley again.

HE couldn't bring Morley out of it. No mark on his body, no reason for his unconsciousness—but he just wouldn't come to. Thompson carried him back, and sought out one of the Jamaicans who had been absent that morning.

"I tried to find out what had happened so I could cure Morley," Thompson declared. "I thought maybe they'd slipped him some native drug. But the black boy swore they hadn't.

"Then you hit him in some way that wouldn't show," I said to the boy. He shook his head like he was going to shake it off. "You lie," I said. "Of course you tried to kill him, for doing what he did."

"The boy said something then that I didn't like. 'We not have to kill him,' he said, showing all his teeth. 'He die soon anyhow. The serpent kill him. The great green serpent—'"

"What the devil," I said, breaking in again, "is this great green serpent?"

"That's it," said Thompson.

"What's it?"

"What you said. The devil."

"I don't understand."

"I don't either, exactly," said Thompson. "The cult down this way is a worship of the great green serpent. The black boys sacrifice to it. They get hold of a snake, big or little makes no difference, and bow down to it as the outward form of their particular devil. It's all devil-worship, you know. That's all I can tell you. I think that is all any white man could tell you.

"The great green serpent does this, that and the other thing . . . ' In this case it was going to kill Morley for his sacrilegious intrusion. You don't kill a priest, in any language, and get away with it."

"To get back," I suggested.

"Nothing more to get back to, far as I'm concerned," said Thompson, trying to get up and for the first time showing signs of drunkenness. "Morley lay dead for thirty hours. Then he snapped out of it, just before the fruit boat was due to land with a doctor on it."

"Well?" I said.

"That's all," shrugged Thompson. "He went north on the boat for his six months, and when he came back he was given a stand at Porte Risa, next stop north."

"Good Lord!" I said. "Didn't you even have curiosity enough to ask him—"

"I've been trying to tell you," said Thompson, with alcoholic patience, "that curiosity in a thing like this is about as dangerous as playing tag with a bush-master. No. I had no curiosity. Not after observing Morley."

"And he didn't say anything, on his own?"

"No. He didn't say what he'd seen—if anything—before he swung at the old man's jaw. He didn't say what had floored him at the cave mouth where I'd found him. In fact, he did hardly any talking at all, on any subject. He didn't speak a dozen words in the time before he left for the dock. And then he drifted off with his eyes all blank, as if he was still out on his feet. I never saw him after that."

"He went to New York?"

"I suppose so," nodded Thompson.

"You know nothing more?"

"Well," said Thompson, "I watched the men I felt sure had been in that cave when Morley stormed in. As Morley left, not one of them even looked at him. But one of them said, so I could hear, 'That man die soon.' Just like that. With no emotion at all, with absolute confidence."

"I collared the man. 'What would make him die?' 'The great green serpent,' the man said. And his face didn't change expression even when I lost my temper and belted him one."

Suddenly I noticed something that moved me to a point between laughter and pity for an educated man who has let blind superstition corrode reason—Thompson's right hand.

Half-hidden by the edge of the table, it was clenched, with forefinger and little finger extending out like horns. I'd seen ignorant blacks form these horns—against the evil eye. But never a white man before.

"Now you know all I know," said Thompson. "And much good it'll do you. If you have any sense at all you'll ask no more about Morley."

I GOT to New York after a four-month swing, tanned the color of a tramp's coffee-pot, but not feeling quite as husky as I looked. The tropics do take it out of you, if you're not used to them.

No rest for the weary. I was to shove off, at the beginning of the next week, for Cleveland and Chicago and then south to New Orleans and back up to St. Louis, where wholesale branches had books that needed checking. I could have stood a rest, but I didn't feel quite done in enough to press for it.

I went to the cashier just before the New York office closed for the day.

Yes, Morley had come in immediately after leaving the boat, some seven months ago when he'd come north for his first leave. The cashier had advanced him some money, but that was all he knew. Why didn't I talk to Bob Ormond? Bob had been a particular friend of Morley's.

I had dinner with Ormond. He was a tall, thin, black-headed young fellow. About my age, I guessed, somewhere between twenty-seven and twenty-nine.

"So you were with Clyde Morley when he did it?" Ormond said in a low tone.

I nodded. "I'll spare the details, though."

"Yes," said Ormond, "I guess you'd better, from what we heard up here." He tilted his empty coffee cup and looked at the grounds. "Clyde must have done it because of his health. He looked rotten when he landed here, after his first three-year stretch. And when he left, he looked twenty years older and like a very sick man. Yet he wasn't sick."

"You're sure of that?" I asked.

"The doctor said he was all right."

"Doctor?"

"He looked so bad," said Morley's friend, "that the company insisted he go to a well-known doctor and get a checking over. They thought he might have picked up some tropical, wasting disease, I guess. But the doc said no, he was physically all right. Good doctor, too. Bellknap, of Longview Hospital."

"Physically right?" I said. "But . . ."

Ormond stared at the coffee grounds.

"Something was on his mind. Something that must have happened to him down in the jungle, because I'm dead sure he had nothing on his mind when he left the first time. I think, whatever it was, it stayed with him day and night. Didn't even leave him when he was sleeping—if he ever did sleep."

"You have no idea what it was?"

"No idea at all. He said just one thing that might have a bearing on it. He said: 'Don't ever let 'em transfer you to the tropics, Bob. You do things down there that you can't for the life of you understand having done when you get back here to civilization and sanity again.'"

Ormond's troubled eyes came to mine.

"It sounds as if he'd lost some of his self control, down there, and done something violent. Almost as if . . . he'd killed a man. Or something."

I THOUGHT of Thompson's account of the apelike, ancient black man, chest dabbled in blood, whose neck had been broken by Morley's fist. But I said nothing about that.

"If something connected with the jungle was on his mind, and he was afraid of it," I said, "why did he go back down?"

"I asked him why he didn't stay north, too," said Ormond. "He said he couldn't, unless he quit the company. They don't like to train men to take over in the stands and then have them come back here for work any clerk can do," he added.

"So Morley either went back down, or looked for a job with another outfit," I said.

"Yes. And jobs aren't easy to get, you know. But I don't believe that really had much to do with it. Clyde acted—I don't know if it's just the right word—sort of *fatalistic* about it. As if he'd have to go to the jungle in spite of everything, as if that was in the cards. As if he didn't want to go, but it was his destiny so he might as well go and get it over."

"That was all he said that might have a bearing on his wasted condition?"

"That was all," said Ormond. "But there was one thing he did that still sticks in my mind. I suppose it doesn't mean anything, though."

He stared back at the coffee grounds.

"Clyde was always a regular guy. Smoked, drank, and buzzed the girls. But not when he came back. Before he left to go down to his stand, I wanted to get a couple of girls for us to take out on a foursome. Thought it would take his mind off whatever it was that had him down. But he didn't want to. Acted almost frightened at the bare mention of a girl. He said he was bad luck to girls."

"And the smoking and drinking?" I said.

"He still drank. Like a fish, in fact, though it didn't seem to make him spifflicated. But he didn't smoke any more. He gave a wacky reason for that. Said he wasn't able to handle matches."

"Not able to handle matches?" I stared.

"Yes. Crazy, isn't it? And yet . . ."

Ormond stared at me—and through me.

"We had dinner together the night before he sailed back. About this hour. I fished out a cigarette with the coffee, and asked him to pass the book of matches on the table. It was over on his side. Then I saw a guy from the office come in, and waved to him. Next thing I knew people around our table were laughing, and Clyde was holding a book of matches—all on fire.

"Just a silly little accident. I suppose he'd struck one, meaning to lean across the table and give me a light, and had touched it by mistake against the heads of the rest so the whole book caught fire. But the thing I particularly remember was the way he looked. I thought he was either going to go mad on the spot, or slide under the table in a dead faint."

I parted from Ormond, and went to see the Doctor Bellknap he had quoted. I caught him at his apartment, about to go out for a late dinner.

BELLKNAP was small-boned, delicate looking, but as brisk and businesslike as a small, slim dagger. Very, very businesslike and practical. And in a tearing hurry.

"I'm sorry," he said, before I'd had a chance to say why I was here, "I can't take care of you now. You might go to Doctor Junius, same building, first floor, for treatment."

"Treatment?" I said. "I didn't come for treatment. I don't need a doctor."

Bellknap said confusedly, "Oh. I thought . . ."

I explained what I had come for. He couldn't place the name of Clyde Morley for awhile, and in the meantime he kept looking at his wristwatch and wanting to get away to his dinner date. Then he got it.

"Ah, yes. The man from the fruit company. An absurd case. Job for a psychiatrist, not a physician."

"I understand you examined him and found nothing wrong."

"Nothing *organically* wrong," snapped

Bellknap. "But in general—the man was busy killing himself with some sort of delusion. It can be done, you know. If you'll excuse me—"

"Did he say anything that might just hint what delusion he had?" I interrupted, keeping in front of him so he couldn't move without stepping on me.

"No. No—yes, in a way, come to think of it, he did. I was trying my damndest to find out why a man of twenty-nine should be physically sound and yet look like a man of sixty, when he said something about a curse. What was it? Oh, yes. Something like this: 'Doctor, do you believe a curse can be laid on a man?'"

Doctor Bellknap whistled impatiently through his teeth.

"Imagine! A question like that in this day and age! I told him of course I didn't believe in such things. As a scientist I believed in nothing I couldn't see and hear and feel. 'But if you could feel it, and not see or hear it?' he said.

Bellknap had forgotten, at least for the moment, to look at his watch. "It was an interesting hint," he said. "So I humored him. I asked him, 'How could you feel a thing that can't be seen?' He mumbled that you could feel air and not see it, couldn't you? So I tried another angle.

"'You mention it,' I said 'What is it?'"

"'I don't know,' he said.

"'Where is it? Near you?' I asked him.

"'Damn near,' he said. 'Sometimes I can feel it behind me, sometimes beside me, sometimes right over me. I always know where it is, even if I can't see—' He stopped in a hurry, and you could see what he was thinking. 'I'd better shut up or they'll be putting me in a padded cell.'

"And if you ask me," said Bellknap, pushing past me at last, "that's where we should have put your friend, too. Good heavens—a quarter past nine! I'm already ten minutes late."

So I was left with a little more for my collection of Morleyana, a few things that were as murky and grimly fantastic as the rest of the affair.

Morley had above all not wanted to go

back to the jungle, yet he had gone. "Fatalistically," as Ormond had put it. As though he couldn't have stayed away even if he had tried his best. As if his destiny lay there and he had to go to it on unwilling feet.

The rigmarole about the matches was incomprehensible. He had said he couldn't handle matches any more. And in passing a book to Ormond he had clumsily managed to set the thing afire. But what of it?

He had mentioned a curse to the examining physician, and here we really seemed to be getting somewhere. Men have died or killed themselves before now because they imagined some sort of spell was laid on them. Morley must have come from that dim voodoo cave where he had killed an old man with a blow of his fist, with the conviction that a curse would follow him. The blacks had been serenely sure of it too, which hadn't helped. So, with his own imagination, Morley had killed himself. Rather simple after all.

I thought that for three weeks, till I got to Chicago, which, I learned next day at the office, was Morley's home town. Then I had my simple, reasonable solution knocked into a cocked hat.

IV

THE sales manager's secretary, in Chicago, had gone to Chicago U with Morley; knew him well. She gave direction to my Morleyana collecting at this stage.

"Poor darling," she said of Morley. "He had a rotten time home on leave. A tragic time, too."

It seemed there was a girl, and she had died. Her name was Polly Keith, and she was an orphan, living with an uncle on the north side of Chicago. As far as any one knew, there'd been no definite engagement. Yet it was understood that Morley was going to marry her some day, when he'd worked up from banana herder to port manager. Then, she had died, about six weeks before Morley left Chicago to go back to the jungle via New York.

The secretary didn't know what she'd died of. No one seemed to know. Maybe something she'd caught from Morley, for he looked very ill just before he left. But doctors had said nothing was wrong with Morley, and the physician attending Polly Keith had mumbled something about tularemia, as though he weren't very convinced of the presence of that rare disease himself.

I went to see the uncle, Brian Keith, in Rogers Park. Keith was a thin-faced man of sixty, living alone, with an ancient housekeeper in a huge apartment. I'd hardly said that I'd come to talk a little about Clyde Morley when he jumped down my throat.

"Who are you?" he snapped. "A friend of that young rotter's?"

I blinked. This was the first time anyone had called Morley out of turn. Everyone else had seemed to like him.

"I'm an acquaintance, in a way," I said. "I was with him when he died. I'm asking around, here and there, trying to find out why he killed himself."

"Guilty conscience, if you ask me," said Keith, glaring.

I stared at him, wondering if he knew more of the circumstances of Morley's death than I'd imagined.

"I can't imagine a guiltier conscience than that owned by a murderer," Keith said with cold venom. "And that's what your precious 'acquaintance' was, my friend. A murderer. He murdered my niece. I *know* it. For your information, young Morley left Chicago for the tropics just in time to escape a murder charge. I was going to prefer one as sure as we're standing here."

This was completely off the track! I didn't say anything, just waited for him to go on.

"He poisoned Polly," Keith said bitterly. "I don't know what he gave her. The doctor didn't know. Maybe an autopsy wouldn't have shown it. But sure as hell he gave her some damned jungle stuff that gradually killed her. I tried to tell her what was happening before it was too late, but she wouldn't believe what I said."

"Why would he poison her?" I said.

"I don't know. But he certainly must have. He'd been home in Chicago about two months, going around with Polly nearly every night, when she began to lose her health."

"What was the sickness like?"

"She just sort of faded away. I think it was slow arsenic poisoning. I've read that it acts like that. She lost her color. Then she began losing weight and energy. Her skin got kind of waxy, then dulled more and more. And her hair lost its luster. Toward the very end, you could see spots on her skin."

"A rash?" I said, speaking low and without inflection. He was talking more to himself than to me, now, and I just threw in a word occasionally to keep him going.

"No, not a rash. The spots were big, like bruises as big as saucers all over her. You could barely see them as faint marks under the skin, and they came and went. When you were a kid you probably blew soap bubbles. You probably remember how a bubble acts before it bursts. It's as beautiful as a rainbow. Then the colors turn to yellow and white, big dark spots begin to show where the bubble is stretching too thin, and then it dies. It was like that with Polly. She was so beautiful. Then her color faded, then, like some tropical fruit that has passed ripeness, she seemed to shrink in on herself and rot—and fall. It was horrible."

"And you think Morley was responsible. But why do you think that?"

"I HEARD him admit as much, one night just before the end," Keith said in a low tone. "He was with her constantly, during that time. Though she was only in bed a week. She didn't seem weak enough for bed before that. Morley was in her room with her. The doctor had just gone—he never did find out exactly what was wrong, and finally put tularemia on the death certificate."

"I was, frankly, listening outside the door. Spying, if you want to call it that. For I was beginning to think Morley had

something to do with Polly's condition."

"And you heard Morley admit guilt?"

"I don't know what else you could call it! I heard him say, 'I'll never forgive myself if anything happens to you. Because if it does—it will all be my fault.' I heard Polly say, 'Don't be silly, darling. And whatever you do, don't leave me.'"

"That doesn't sound like an admission of guilt."

"Wait. There's more. Morley said, 'I've got to leave you. I'm killing you by inches, staying near you. I thought I'd be the only one affected. But it seems that anyone I care a great deal about will get it too.'"

"Polly said something about him not *knowing* that that was what was wrong. He said, 'The gamble is too big for me to take. I'm not going to see you, touch you, any more after tonight. For when I touch a thing I love, that thing withers. I know that now.' Polly began to get hysterical. She said even if there was something in what he said, the damage was done now. She might not pull through this. If not, she couldn't bear not having seen him clear to the end?"

"So he kept coming to see her?"

"Yes. He was with her when she died. And if ever a man acted guilty. . . He rushed out of here that night and no one knows where he went or what he did for seventy-two hours."

"He was in Chicago for some weeks after that," I said. "Why didn't you prefer your murder charge? You had plenty of time."

Keith bit his lips.

"I had my suspicions," he said, "but I wasn't sure. It wasn't till I heard he'd done the same thing to another girl that the meaning became clear to me. By then he was on his way to Central America, so I finally didn't do anything."

"Another girl?"

"Yes. Some friend of his sister's. The sister died seven or eight years ago, I believe. The friend's name is Harriet Porter. Polly knew her slightly. Go and talk to her. See how Morley treated her. Then see if I'm wrong in thinking that Morley was Polly's murderer!"

HOWEVER, Harriet Porter, whether she knew of Keith's attitude or not, was certainly not on his side. From her came no blame of Morley. Grim mystery, springing from depths beyond reach of the normal mind, yes. But no blame.

"I got sick during the time I was seeing him," she said, after a lot of preliminary talk to get her to tell without suspicion or resentment what she knew about Clyde Morley. "I got very sick. And Clyde seemed to think he had something to do with it. But I can't believe he did. Unless he passed on to me whatever was making him ill."

"He was ill, then?"

"He certainly was. He looked awful."

"Did he say what the trouble was?" I asked quickly. Every one had mentioned how sick Morley looked, but no one had put a name to it. I thought that here, at last, I might get something definite. But I didn't.

"No, he didn't say," murmured Harriet Porter. "In fact he insisted he had nothing whatever the matter with him. But his looks denied that. He was thin, and looked old, and his color—"

She looked briefly at me. "His color was a little like yours," she said in an apologetic tone. "Oh, much worse of course. A sort of yellow . . ."

I stared at her in some amazement, then laughed.

"Oh," I said. "I see. Well, the color would be a bit similar. It's tropic tan, fading a little now that I've been north awhile."

"Oh, so that's it," she murmured. "Fading tan. . . But Clyde's color was due to something more than that."

"You say you got sick while you were seeing him. Did they say what it was? Tularemia, perhaps?"

She sniffed. She was a nice looking girl, tall, well built, with gray eyes wide apart and the kind of a mouth you can trust.

"Tularemia! That's what they said Polly died of. My doctor was more honest. He just didn't know what was the matter, and said so. Whatever it was, it was the same thing Polly Keith had. I felt all the time,

and lost my appetite. But I wasn't sick enough to go to bed. Later, after Clyde had left town, my hair fell out."

She colored faintly. "My what a sight I was! I've only just lately been going out again. As you can see, I've still got a very short bob indeed! And my hair came back in a little darker brown than it was."

"If you had the same thing Miss Keith did, how do you account for the fact that you got well and she didn't."

HARRIET PORTER'S nice, honest eyes grew veiled. "I had another doctor, after a while. One Clyde brought to me. A . . . a Negro."

"A Negro doctor?"

"Well, he wasn't a doctor, exactly."

"I don't understand."

She looked hard at me. "You're sure you're not a detective or something? This won't go into some official report somewhere?"

I reassured her.

"It would be too silly if it did! You see, the Negro did some rather ridiculous things. He was a very old man, with graying hair. I don't know where Clyde got him—on the South Side somewhere, I suppose. He hobbled in and sat down and opened a wrinkled black case. From it he took the weirdest things! Dried stuff that was parts of animals, I think, and several disgusting looking powders, and some dried weeds. He never touched me, and hardly even looked at me. He burned a little of the powder, and fiddled around with the other stuff, and then left."

It seemed to me she wasn't telling quite all of it.

"What did Morley do during all this?"

"Clyde went into the next room," Harriet Porter said, after a long hesitation. "The old Negro seemed to be very much afraid of him. Every time Morley came near him, he shrank back with his eyes rolling. And he never once looked at Clyde or spoke to him. Speaking to me instead of to Clyde, he said that Clyde would have to go away before he'd do anything.

I very nearly stopped the whole thing when he said that. I was dead against the whole foolish mumbo-jumbo anyhow. But Clyde pleaded so hard I let the man do his funny little tricks."

"And then?"

"After that night, Clyde never called on me again, and a week later he phoned his goodbye and left for the tropics. And . . . I got better from then on, only my hair fell out."

"Did Morley ever mention Polly Keith to you?" I asked.

"I don't know why I should answer all these questions," Harriet said, "even if you were such a close friend of Clyde's."

I said nothing about the actual slightness of my acquaintanceship with Clyde Morley. Collectors are unscrupulous. After a doubtful pause, she picked it up again.

"Yes, he talked a lot of Polly. It was to talk of her that he came to see me, after she died. When Clyde's sister died, he sort of transferred his affection for her onto me. There was never any love affair between Clyde and me, in any sense of the word. But we were very, very fond of each other. And after what happened to Polly he turned to me because he had no women-folks of his own to go to."

"What did he say about the tragedy?"

"He seemed to hold himself responsible. He said something about being a blight on people he loved. He said he'd always feel as if he'd killed her. I tried to tell him what nonsense that was. But when I got sick he went almost crazy. He said, 'My God, now I *know*! I'll never risk even a slight friendship with a woman again.'"

"Didn't he explain that statement?"

"No, he didn't explain a thing. Either his words, or the odd visit of the old black man that night."

"And he looked to be in very bad health?"

"Yes. That last night I saw him, he looked to be dying on his feet. I've never been so sorry for him in my life. I think that's the reason—his health—that he stopped smoking. Although he gave another reason for it—a crazy reason. About matches."

I kept sudden intense interest from showing in my face as plainly as in my mind. "Smoking? Matches?" I said, with careful carelessness.

She gave me that hard, questioning look again.

"This is mad!" she said. "If it ever got out. . . ."

Unscrupulous collector of sinister Morleyana, I reassured her again.

"We went to a night club once or twice," Harriet said. "He felt Polly's death so dreadfully, seemed to be so desperate, for some reason. I thought it might take his mind off his troubles.

"The thing about the matches happened there. I took a cigarette from my purse and smiled at him. 'Well,' I said, 'after a minute, 'aren't you going to give a lady a light?' He gave me a funny look, and shoved a box of safety matches on the table ashtray over to me with the tips of his fingers. 'You'd better light your own,' he said. 'I can't handle matches any more. That's why I stopped smoking.'"

Harriet's face was a little pale and her eyes a bit too wide.

"'You can't handle matches?' I said to him. 'What in the world do you mean?' He said he meant just that—he couldn't handle matches. Then as I kept looking at him as if he'd suddenly gone crazy, he said something in a low tone about matches bursting into flame when he touched them. 'Nonsense!' I said, and I think I laughed. Anyway, he was suddenly very angry. But under it you could see that he was in mortal terror, and that's why he was angry. 'I'm telling you I can't touch the things any more!' I guess I laughed again, and he went white-faced and furious. 'All right, damn it, look,' he said."

Harriet Porter shivered.

"He edged the box from the ashtray standard onto the table. The top wasn't torn off the box as it often is when you slip a fresh box into the slide. The box was whole, and closed. The matches were the regular safety matches. You know, the kind that won't light if scratched on any-

thing but the side of the box itself. Clyde passed his fingertips very lightly over the box."

Her fingers were twisting and untwisting, hard.

"The box of matches burst into flame under his hand."

I gaped at her.

"Don't look at me like that! I'm telling heaven's truth!"

"It simply burst into flame when he touched it?"

"Yes."

"You were watching all the time? You weren't looking in some other direction for a minute?"

"I was watching all the time."

"He must have had one in his palm and scratched it."

"Why would he want to play jokes at such a time? Anyhow, he didn't. Just his fingertips touched the top of the closed box, and passed over it—and the whole thing went up in flame. He dumped his water glass over it, but it burned a hole in the table cloth."

"What could be the possible explanation of a thing like that?" I exclaimed.

"How should I know?" she said, looking sorry already that she'd spoken as she had. "It happened, that's all I can say."

So there were two more items for my collection.

If you could believe Harriet Porter's fantastic yarn about the matches as it stood, Morley couldn't touch the little fire-sticks without having them burst into flame.

Of two women loved by him in slightly different manner, one had died and one had been very ill, of something that baffled the doctors. As if he had indeed laid a deadly blight on them by mere contact.

The latter of the two items blasted my theory that once more in the world's history man had let his own imagination kill him. Maybe all of Morley's trouble had lain in his own mind, but something much more tangible must have been present for two other individuals to have suffered! Had he been a carrier of some rare tropical

fever, and passed it innocently on to the two girls? Well, it was possible. And the aged Negro brought around by Morley to Harriet Porter might have known the native herb cure for it.

But every instinct rejected that logical theory. Not exactly a doctor, Harriet had described the old black man. And the proper term kept whispering itself in my brain all the time I was trying to ignore it.

Witch-doctor.

V

PROFESSOR Martin had taught—or tried vainly to pound into my thick head—anthropology, at Northwestern University. He lived quite near, in Rogers Park, so on impulse I'd dropped in for a little visit with him. He is seventy-eight, but hale and sound, and the country's outstanding authority on native superstitions.

"Well!" he greeted me. "It's good to see you again. Same as you used to be, except I do believe you're getting bald."

"I've dropped a few feathers recently," I admitted. "In front. But it runs in my family."

I talked a lot about things of no especial interest, and a very little, as casually as I could make it, about his specialty.

"I've just come up from the land where voodoo grows," I said, smiling. "Tell me, do you think there's anything in it?"

"Anything in voodoo?" he said. "That's a silly question. I don't know."

"You must have an opinion on it."

Professor Martin peered from under white, thick eye-brows as if I were still a freshman in his class.

"It's a widespread superstition," he said. "Several million people practise it devoutly."

"You're weaseling," I accused.

He shrugged. "A young student of aboriginal religions is apt to laugh at all of them. A middle-aged investigator, after years of study, is apt to half-believe in them himself. An old-timer just doesn't know. I'm a very old-timer."

"Could a voodoo curse kill a man?"

He smiled with his lips but not his eyes.

"Scientists have a sound theory, there. They say the curse is laid on a man in such a fashion that he can't help but dwell on it later. After that, pure mental suggestion gradually kills him."

"Weaseling again! Not giving your own opinions! Have you ever heard of the great green serpent?"

"Surely. That's one of the major voodoo cults. Worship of the devil in the form of the great green serpent is practised in Jamaica, I believe."

I told him about Morley.

"Auto-hypnotism, of course," he said. "Sheer mental suggestion."

"The matches? The sickness of the girls?"

"Doubtless there is a natural explanation for those things," he said. But he wasn't looking at me. And I didn't get to see into his eyes from then till the time I left.

He shook my hand. "Glad you dropped in," he said. "It has been some time since I saw any of the class of '22."

I started to correct him, but didn't. It was the only sign of his age that I'd observed—this confusing of the class I'd graduated in. I'd got out in '32, not 1922.

I swung down to New Orleans from Chicago and had a hard and exhausting grind. One of the main branches is at the Gulf port town. There was a mixup there that took me quite awhile to straighten out; and when the job was done I was ready for a rest.

I applied for and got two weeks off. I just loafed around, feeling like hell but not able to say why. I just seemed tired all the time, and didn't have any appetite. A doctor looked me over, mumbled something vague about me being run down, and slightly anemic, and gave me a tonic. Then I had to snap out of it and go to St. Louis.

St. Louis! It gave the final bizarre and deadly item in my collection as it stands today.

A LITTLE after Polly Keith died, when, I suppose, Morley was beside himself for something to do to keep his mind from complete madness, he had gone to St. Louis for a few days' visit with some fraternity brothers who also had jobs with the fruit company and who had been stationed at the branch there. I looked them up, and we went to a show and then wound up at the university club, where we sat in a semicircle—four of us—around the fireplace.

A fresh-cheeked young attendant took our drink order. The New Orleans doctor had told me to lay off hard liquor while I felt so lousy, so I compromised and ordered Rhine wine and seltzer water.

"Yes, sir," said the youngster deferentially.

There was no trouble swinging the talk to Morley. It had touched on him all evening, because of the fact that I'd been with him when he died and had recently come back from the scene of his death.

"Ill health, of course," rumbled a huge ex-halfback named Regan, from the depths of a leather wing-chair. "I guess it was the effects of the tropics. Clyde Morley couldn't stand being sick all the time, so he checked out. That's my answer for it. He certainly looked like a perambulating corpse when he was here."

"Color of blue clay," nodded a little blond fellow named French.

The third man, Cy Jones, sat on a low bench angling away from the fireplace, and stared into the embers.

"That's all it was," declared Regan, too firmly. "Sickness. Lots of suicides have been caused by that."

"Sure," said French.

"Nuts," said Jones.

The three of us swung to stare at him. He didn't look at us, kept on gazing into the flame, face grim.

"Why do you kid yourselves?" he said harshly, after a moment. "You know damned well Morley's sickness was like nothing any of us have ever seen before, or will ever see again. The few hints he dropped, prove that."

"Don't be a damned fool," snapped Regan.

"No, don't," said French, looking askance at me.

"You're the damned fools. Like most people. Something happens that you can't think up an answer for—so right away it never happened at all."

"Morley talked out of his head because he was ill," said Regan.

"Yes. Because he was ill," echoed French.

"Cy's the imaginative type," Regan said to me.

"Quite imaginative." French nodded.

Jones grimaced at the two of them. "Sure. I imagined the thing that happened right here in front of this fireplace, while Morley was in St. Louis. And the thing that happened later at Watson's apartment."

Regan threw his glance meaningly at me again.

"Nuts," said Jones. "He was a friend of Morley's. No reason why he shouldn't know."

"Morley was drunk that night," Regan said quickly.

"Very drunk," added French.

Jones laughed at them. There was no humor in that laugh. "When Morley was here, he'd got to a point where he couldn't get drunk if he tried. You know that as well as I do. All liquor could do to him, perhaps, was make him say things that otherwise he might have kept to himself. I'll grant he was drunk to that extent, that night. But no more."

"Well," I said, "spill it! What did he say that night? What did he do? What happened that you're all so mysterious about?"

"They don't want to tell," Jones said, jerking his head toward French and Regan, "because it's something you can't wrap up in a neat little bundle of reason and put in a logical pigeonhole. But I'm willing at least to recognize the existence of something I don't understand."

I waited.

He talked, looking into the fire.

VI

MORLEY had been in a very bad way when he came to St. Louis. And not all of it could possibly be laid to the death of a girl he loved. It went beyond that. He looked like a man afflicted by a terrible physical ailment. And yet he got around all right.

The boys in St. Louis had done their best to jerk him out of whatever quicksand he was in. They'd wined and dined him. And finally they'd taken him to a burlesque show and wound up here at the university club before the fireplace with scotch and sodas at hand.

All the time, Morley had acted as if his body were with them, but his mind a million miles away. He acted like a "haunted" man, Jones put it, staring into the fire.

"Who's your friend?" Regan had twitted Morley.

The result of the simple sentence amazed them. Morley jumped up—he was sitting on the bench while the other three were in chairs, Jones said. He glared at Regan like a madman.

"Can you see it?" he said. "Is it getting to the point where it can be *seen*?"

"What in hell are you talking about?" stammered Regan.

Morley gave him a long, terrible look. "What are you talking about, Regan?"

"Your thoughts seemed to be so far away," said Regan, "that I took it you were thinking about some friend. A nice blond one, maybe. I was kidding you, that was all. Just asked who was the friend you were thinking of . . ."

Morley sat down on the bench, white and shaking.

"Oh," he said. He gulped his drink. It was the tail of a long procession of drinks. A stony grin came to his lips. "I came up from the jungle with a companion," he said. "A close companion. Never leaves me. I thought maybe you'd seen my companion. I myself never have. It's with me now."

"How d'you know—" said Regan.

"Oh, I can feel it there. Always near me."

It was making them very uncomfortable, but none of them knew how to drop it. "You mean," suggested Jones, "some native wench you had to leave behind is watching over you to see that you don't play around too much?"

"Not a native wench," said Morley, tilting an empty glass.

Regan rang for an attendant to get another drink. The summons wasn't answered, so he stepped to the door of the small side room and beckoned. When he came back, he started to sit on the bench beside Morley instead of in the chair he'd left.

"Don't sit there!" Morley snapped.

"What?" said Regan, bewildered.

"My pal's sitting there," Morley said, with the stony grin on his lips.

"Oh." Regan stared at the bench, and played along with it. "Oh, yes. I see, now. Nice fellow."

"Not nice at all," said Morley. "It's killing me. It killed Polly Keith, just because she was tangled up with me."

Jones had butted in then—Jones, the "imaginative."

"Look here, Clyde, have you really got some idea there's something hanging around you since you left the tropics, or are you kidding us?"

"I'm kidding you," said Morley, "by saying I really believe it. Hell, I know it."

"What is it?"

"That, I don't know."

"Ghosts and stuff, huh?" said Regan, with a laugh that didn't ring true.

"And stuff," said Morley.

French tried to turn the subject. "I know a guy who took a picture of a ghost, once. You all know him, too. Tubby Watson."

"Is he in St. Louis, too?" said Morley.

"Yes. He showed me the picture. It was the smartest job of faking I've ever seen."

Then Regan, huge bull in a china shop, had twisted the evening into tragedy. Though, heaven knows, no one could blame

him. You can't foresee the unforeseeable.

"Hey!" he said. "Idea! We'll go and call on Tubby right now. Have him take a picture of Clyde. Maybe the picture will show his jungle pal. The camera's supposed to catch things sometimes that the eye can't get. And if he took a picture of one ghost, why couldn't he take a picture of another?"

ALL very gay and spontaneous on the surface. But underneath, in the minds of three sincere friends, a deep pity for Morley and a half-coherent wish to do something to stamp out whatever evil it was that clawed at his mind and wasted away his body.

"Oh, no!" Morley said. "No pictures!"

"Why not?" said Jones.

"Well, in the first place," said Morley, "It couldn't be done. Nobody can take a picture of me."

There was perplexed silence.

"Don't stare at me like a bunch of nit-wits," Morley snapped. "It's the truth. I can't be photographed. And don't ask me why, because I don't know."

"How do you know you can't be?"

"Polly wanted a new picture of me, when I first got back to Chicago," Morley said. "I went to a photographer on Madison Street. He took six shots, in various angles, and none of them came out."

"Why?"

"He said the plates were blank when he came to develop them."

"Defective plates. Simple enough—"

"So he took eight more shots. And the plates were exposed, but blank, when he came to develop them. So he said he'd give it up. I think he was a little afraid by then. Not that I blame him."

"But, Clyde, that one time—"

"I went to three more photographers. Same thing happened. I tell you, I can't be photographed."

"That's the craziest thing I ever heard of," Regan protested. "And dwelling on such a crazy accident can't be good for you, Clyde. Come on. We'll go to Tubby's place. He'll get a snap of you."

They'd almost dragged Morley by force to Watson's apartment. There'd been greetings, reunion, more drinks. Then Regan, making light of the whole thing, told why they'd come. And Tubby laughed.

"Can't take a picture of you? My boy, the thing I can't photograph doesn't exist. Say, now, wouldn't it be something if Clyde were right and there was some kind of a whingpoo hanging around him? Some poor lonesome shade lost from his own sphere?"

With Morley still protesting, and making the lot of them uncomfortable because of his obvious horror at the prosaic idea of having his picture taken, Tubby Watson set up lights and a small portrait camera that exposed a plate at a time.

"See the little birdie," he said, and clicked the shutter. He took four pictures of Morley, from different angles.

"Can't be photographed, eh?" he said, going into his dark room. "We'll see."

HE CAME back after a few minutes with a queer look on his plump face. He had the four plates, developed, in his hand. "That's funny," he said. "There's nothing on 'em."

"What?" exclaimed Regan.

"I mean they're blank. All four of them."

Watson laid the four plates on the table near where the camera was set up. Regan and French and Cy Jones went over to them and stared at them.

They were exposed, but blank.

Morley didn't get up to look. "I told you," he said.

"I must be going nuts," said Watson irritably. "Or else my camera's on the fritz." He reached for a crumpled pack of cigarettes on the table and got a match out of an accompanying box. "The focus was set right. The lights are okay; I've taken pictures with them lots of times in here. Yet I get four blanks!"

"Look, Tubby," Morley said, sweating, "let's call it off—"

"Damned if I will," said Watson. "I'll take some more."

He struck the match on the side of the box to light his cigarette—

Jones, sitting on the bench and talking while he stared into the fire, stopped. I saw a shudder go over him. French and Regan were staring pleadingly at him, obviously not wanting him to go on.

"When he struck the match," Jones said, "somehow he ignited the rest of the box. I don't know how—the box was closed tightly. I remember that distinctly. But all of a sudden the whole thing was in a blaze, lying on the table next to the four exposed plates."

"Cy—" said Regan, voice cracking.

Jones gulped some of his scotch and soda, drily, feverishly. French muttered something in a shaky voice.

"Watson had said the plates were blank," Jones stumbled on. "We'd seen for ourselves they were blank. But I guess the heat of the burning box did something to them that Watson's hypo tank hadn't done. Anyhow, faint outlines formed on the plates."

"You imagined it," Regan cut in hoarsely. "I tell you there was nothing. Look, sir," he added to me, "there's no use going into this any further. It's ridiculous—"

"Ridiculous?" said Jones. "You saw the four plates change yourself. So did French there. Only you won't admit it. Four pictures, appearing faintly on the exposed plates under the heat of the flame. One a picture of an old, old Negro with white hair and the face of a thing that had been months dead. One a picture of a girl I recognized—Polly Keith. One a picture of another girl I didn't know. But only half a face showed in this last one—the upper half, with hair seeming to be out in patches."

Jones moistened his lips, and his lips were white.

"The fourth picture?" I heard myself asking, almost in a whisper.

"Of Watson himself. Of the man who had stood behind the camera when the plate was exposed. And hovering behind Watson was something . . . something.

. . . But then the fire wiped it forever from sight."

"Fire?" I said, feeling cold as an old man feels cold when his blood runs thin.

"The plates caught from the burning box," said Jones. "Caught? They fairly exploded. They burned like gun-cotton, and before the four of us could see what was happening, the flame caught Tubby Watson's coat and in a second he was a torch. So was the whole room."

"You see?" little French said almost pleadingly to me. "You see? Plates caught fire! Why, they were glass. Only the stuff on them burned—"

"Did you see any trace of the plates afterward?" Silence answered Jones' demand. Regan cleared his throat.

"It wasn't a bad fire," Jones said. "We got it out with water from the kitchenette sink. But Watson was dead."

"I don't think," said Regan, loudly, "there was anything on those four plates before they burned. As for Watson—he just had a heart attack from the burns and the excitement. He was overweight. The police admitted the logic of that."

"Of course, a heart attack," said French. "Though," he added, "we had a time of it with the police before they accepted that idea. If there'd been one little bruise on Tubby's body, I think we'd have faced a murder charge. But there was no mark on him except light burns."

"And there was no mark on any of those photographic plates!" Regan almost shouted. "You hear? They were blank. *Blank!* I want a drink. Where's an attendant? Damn it—"

Jones looked at me.

"There you are," he said to me. "Take your pick. The plates were blank, they say. But they don't try to explain *why* they were blank, when they were taken in perfect lighting by an expert with a camera. And they don't attempt to explain why a man who was only twenty-nine, with nothing the matter with him that any doctor could find, looked as old as—well, *looked as old as you, sir.*"



My breath caught and I crouched motionless—for I recognized the man

Voyage to Leandro

By HOWARD RIGSBY

Begin now this distinguished novel of two lads who set out to discover the land of heart's desire

THIS is the tale of fourteen-year-old David Lester of San Francisco. In the 1880's the city's waterfront had a lure no sturdy lad could deny; for there he would find the tall ships and the wind-burnt men from their decks and that ribald, colorful crowd that made the Barbary Coast famous. It was only natural that David Lester, like his friend Charles Stribling, should ape the vivid talk and the swagger of seamen.

There are two major excitements in young David's life. First, there is the glamorous history of one Jeremy Robb, the mutineer who, with the giant Strom Sorenson, seized the *Lady Hook* for her cargo of bullion. But it is not merely Robb's lawless feat that captures the imagination of David Lester; it is the man's fine, gay bearing as well. For eventually Robb and Sorenson are captured and brought to San Francisco for trial; and the sight of Jeremy Robb, careless and smiling in his bonds, convinces young Lester that here is truly a great man.

THE second excitement is a boat, the property of David's companion, Charles Stribling. On this fast cutter the two boys explore San Francisco Bay; in fact, they become such ardent seamen that David's lessons seriously suffer. Then, on one wild adventure, the two spend all night on their craft; and that episode, coupled with David's delinquencies in Latin, compels his father to refuse the boy further voyages on the *Shark*. David feels now that he is an unjustly persecuted prisoner, a fellow-sufferer with Jeremy Robb. When he hears the astounding news that Robb and Sorenson have escaped from the jail, his rebellion sharpens into a definite plan.

He and young Stribling determine to sail to the South Sea Islands in the *Shark*, to set out on a career of high adventure. So one night they flee their homes; with their savings they buy provisions and cautiously board the cutter. There they find a drunken wharf-watchman established, and in a free-for-all hefty David Lester overpowers the old man. They carry him to the wharf—to discover that he is seriously injured and still unconscious. Terrified, they tell each other that he may be dead. "Hurry!" Charles whispers. "We got to get away!" . . .

This story began in last week's *Argosy*

CHAPTER VII

HO, FOR THE SOUTH SEAS

SOMEHOW, in our almost hysterical haste to be gone, we lashed the dinghy on deck, lowered the boxes into the *Shark's* cabin and made sail. The breeze could not have been finer and the bay was placid as a plate with bright tawny moonlight on it. But we were numbed and did not speak. Charles crouched in the cockpit at the tiller and I lay along the deck forward by the mast. We made not a sound as we moved through the water and some magic seemed to be filling our sails. On our lee the city towered, and after we came round Telegraph we could hear the remote babble of the Coast, but there was no beauty in it all, there was only terror. It was not the departure I had dreamed of; then there had been defiance and glory in our going.

The passage along the outer bay continued miraculous; as if some kindly spirit, recognizing our daring, had at last seen fit to help us instead of loading us with more fortuitous catastrophe. We passed no other craft and our wake boiled as we skimmed along toward where the sea crested in the Gate.

Lying looking up at the tall canvas, some of my horror at what had happened passed and I began to feel a reckless quickening in my blood again. As we neared the heads and the bright open sea I crawled back and lay alongside the cockpit. Charles' face was grim.

"It was an accident," I said after a moment. "He came for me and I didn't mean to—to hurt him bad like that."

"That doesn't make any difference," Charles replied. "The judges don't care whether it was an accident or not. We're murderers and if they catch us they'll hang us over at San Quentin prison. So we can't ever come back here. We can't ever see San Francisco again—not all our lives—and we can't ever see our folks or write to them sometimes, or anything. They just got to think we are dead and the police and the judges and everybody else has got to

think we are dead, too. All our lives we got to hide and change our names—and maybe wear disguises."

I sat up and stared back at the outermost lights of the city as we tore pitching into the heads. Charles, too, cast a long glance over his shoulder before he returned to studying the water off the bow. Was this our last sight of our home? Would we never see our parents again? The school? Or sail these waters? Never. I knew that: we would never be boys again in a small boat on the bay, wishing for larger, more remote adventuring on the sea.

"Take in on the main," Charles said gruffly.

I leaned over and hauled in until he said, "Enough." We were now on the open sea, coasting easily over the long light swells.

"You know what we forgot?" asked Charles, more in his normal voice.

"Charts?" I said.

"Yes."

"To hell with them. We'll go by dead reckoning and slip into some little port in Mexico. Maybe we can pick up a sextant there. We don't need charts." I did not know the exact purpose of a sextant, but I knew every good mariner should have one.

"I guess not," Charles agreed. "We can't sail near the coast anyway and if we see a ship we'll have to try and duck before we're sighted. We got to keep sharp watch."

"Nothing can stop us," I said. "We're going to get there—to the South Sea Islands. And no one will ever find us."

Charles smiled and for a moment everything seemed fine and as I had planned it.

"Sure," he said. "We're on our way!"

"Charlie," I wondered aloud, "do you honestly think I'm a murderer? I mean if it was an accident and all and I couldn't help it—that doesn't make me a murderer, does it?"

He frowned. "Well, maybe not. Just technically. I guess it's not like Robb and Sorenson, and men like that. They were *real* murderers."

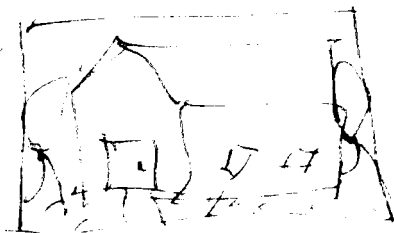
21

2. 4

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Dear mother,

How are you.
Am all right so far.
Shirley is all right too.
she was over to my house.
How do you think the
fin is. How are you all
I is a picture



JEREMY ROBB! How closely I was emulating him; he, too, knew how it felt to be fleeing in the night. And perhaps he knew how easy it was to become an outcast, hunted and persecuted for an accident.

"Charlie!" I said tensely so that he started and looked at me. "Maybe Robb wasn't really any more of a murderer than I am. Maybe he didn't go to—to kill a man either. But it just happened. And then he had to run like us and change his name to Mr. Kingston. And so he just got to doing mutiny and things like that because they were always after him for the accident."

Charles nodded. "Maybe. Maybe that's the way it goes."

"So pirates maybe were just like us to begin with."

"Maybe so."

I suddenly buried my face in my hands. "Oh, Lord," I groaned. "Oh, it's awful! Think of my father, Charlie. What will he say?"

"And mine," Charles echoed presently in a hollow sort of voice. "And my mother. Dave, what will she think of me? I stole. I didn't tell you before, but I only had three dollars in my bank and I stole that forty dollars from her purse. I'm just a thief! And from my own mother!"

For a moment I was shocked out of my own remorse by his confession. Thank God, I thought, I did not have theft to add to my crimes. "She will understand," I told him uncertainly. "She will forgive you, Charlie."

"See if you can find the compass," he said abruptly.

I jumped down into the cabin and got it and when I returned Charles had his handkerchief out, blowing his nose. And something in the set of his lips coupled with a feeling of my own made me recognize then that we would not break out again like that with our distress. All of that was behind us, a past we might dream of in the unknown days to come but must never mention. And the sooner we forgot it the better it would be for us.

Charles took the card compass, our sole aid to navigation, and set it on the deck beside the cockpit. By the moon we could just discern the needle wavering uncertainly a few points off north. Charles turned the compass until needle and north were congruent, then he leaned out so that he could see the sky over the bowsprit.

"See that bright star up there?" he said. "That's west southwest and we'll steer for that until we are out of sight of the coast and then we'll steer due south."

"Maybe we'd better just have a glimpse of land in sight," I said. "That compass may not be right and we will want to be certain we are going south."

"If we sail in sight of the coast we'll be in the shipping lane. If we keep way out, nobody will see us."

I had to agree that he was right, and as we continued swiftly on our course the glow in the sky behind us that was the city, began to fade and the land bulked lower and darker. Before us was only the bright star and the long gleaming swell rolling easy under our bow.

"What do you suppose they'll do when they find out we are gone?" Charles mused.

I HAD a vision of my father breaking open the door of my room and looking at my empty bed, the rifled bank; and I knew how he would act and how he would look. His face would grow pale and stiff and he would be excessively polite to people. He would be very cool and poised and logical about it. I could hear him saying to Mr. Stribling, "We must telegraph the ports up and down the coast to keep a lookout."

"That's what they'll do," I told Charles. "They'll telegraph along and they'll notify the police." And now I could hear my father talking to the police. "My boy would not do a thing like that," he would say. "David would not murder. He is undisciplined, I grant you, but at heart not a bad boy, not a killer. How dare you say so! Where is your proof, sirs? Get out! Get out, please. Leave at once!"

And then he would sit alone in his study and stare at the painting of my mother on the wall and he would run his hands through his dark hair and wonder where I was and why I had gone away. But would he? Would he say those things? Would he care at all?

Charles turned and stared back over the stern and then looked up at the calmdrawing sails. "We're almost out of sight of land," he said. "I'll take the first watch. You go below and get some sleep and I'll wake you when I think it's been about four hours."

I shook my head.

"I couldn't sleep," I said quickly and I lay back on the deck, folding my arms behind my head and staring up at the stars.

"*Cheerily, men!*" I heard the voice piping faintly in the wind and it was repeated in the tiny chirrup and creak of the block next to my head. I saw the blood trickling bright in the tousled gray hair and I wondered if I could ever forget it. Would that old face with its sudden ghastly peace haunt me always?

I shivered, for it was growing colder, but I was afraid to move for fear of destroying this new feeling I was just beginning to be aware of and wished to probe. In it, I was certain, lay peace and forgetfulness. As all men sometime must, I was then just catching my first glimpse of the universe as an infinity and of my own awesome insignificance in it.

Our canvas, which only a moment before had seemed to tower, was suddenly minute, a wisp in the great silent timeless sea. How utterly lonely we were, passing dream-like over the bosom of the earth for a moment, as other men had done in other moments. Here, along this seaway, Drake and Dana and Cook had come and their syllables were still in the wind, their wakes ghostly on the swells. At last I knew the earth for a sphere, the antipodes were no longer just colors on a map but clung perilous at the bottom of my diameter. And under me I could feel the sea, endlessly harkening to the trite rhythms of the moon.

HANDS kept grasping for my throat, and along my left side I felt a sudden numbing shock. I fought back, crying out something, and then woke. Charles was holding onto my jacket and his eyes were alarmed. We were heeling considerably as we ran along and my left arm had been soaked by the sea.

"I was afraid you were going to roll overboard in your sleep," Charles said. "You were yelling and fighting."

I sat up and looked around. The moon was gone, the stars were faint and around us was a circle of dark.

"I think I'll go below and sleep a little," Charles said. "You take her for a while."

I climbed into the cockpit and took the tiller from him. He handed me the compass. "You won't be able to see that star very long," he said, "but keep her west southwest by the compass and call me as soon as it begins to get light."

He yawned and stepped past me. Holding onto the backstay, he stood, peering landward. Returning, he studied the canvas. "Just a little more off the wind," he said. "Even if it takes you a point or two south."

When he had gone below and I had become used to the tiller I found it almost impossible to keep awake. The wind and the monotonous sounds in the rigging were a soporific that I was able to overcome only by constantly changing my position and singing to myself. And, even so, I must have dozed for I remember being startled when I realized that the hem of the horizon had swirled back.

It was no longer dark, nor was it light, but all was demitint, the sea, the sky and the *Shark*, a flat colorless gray, like shade itself. The sea was running higher and the sound of the universe had changed; now the great leaden swells swung up grinning off the weather beam and then plunged under us, hissing white and seething, spittle-topped, on the lee going away swiftly. The wind was cold, the flesh of my hand was numb and I was infinitely depressed. Below in the cabin something rolled regularly, off, then on.

Huddling down in the cockpit I stared back at the East, watching it grow white. Presently the horizon shimmered and the water took on color. Abruptly it was light. My eyes swept the ocean in every direction, but there was no land, not even a bird, only some cumulous low in the sky to the south.

After I had banged on the deck and called him several times, Charles awakened and stuck his head out the companion. He blinked at the day and then came up and looked aft. "We'll make it due south now," he said.

We set the compass on the deck and I was embarrassed to see by it that we were already sailing south southwest. "Maybe it's wrong," I suggested.

Charles looked at the pennant and the swells. "No, it's right. This is the trade—northeasterly. Bring her over a little."

I slewed the bowsprit around and Charles let out on the mainsail and the jib, all the sail we carried. As he took the tiller the sun slid up over the long arc of sea. We could feel its warmth immediately and my spirits rose.

"I'll get us something to eat," I said and jumped down through the hatch.

As I stepped between the bunks I kicked a bottle. That was what I had heard rolling back and forth. I picked it up, noticing the translucent red stain on the floor nearby. The bottle was half full and bore a label that said *Cuba Rum*. I took it to the companion and Charles watched me silently as I threw it overboard.

From the cabin of the *Shark* a small door led to the forepeak and there, ventilated by its own tiny hatch, was the galley. The night before we had tumbled our boxes of provisions in there. The galley possessed a table that folded down from the hull and a swinging stool, and hung in gimbals there was a small oil burner. I opened a tin of biscuit and one of beef and then went over to the watertank to get water for tea. I had almost filled the pot before it occurred to me that we had not replenished the tank for our voyage. After I had taken off the cover and looked in the

nearly empty interior I poured half the pot of water back. We had only a gallon or two and I was not sure how long it would have to last us.

We ate on deck and when we had finished I said, "There is something else we forgot."

Charles nodded. "Water. Did you look in the tank?"

"I did," I told him, "and there's not very much."

"We got to be careful of it," he said. "Unless you really feel you can't stand it without you have a drink, don't take one."

The beef had been salty and I felt thirsty right then, but I did not mention it or go near the watertank. I took off my shoes, tumbled on a bunk below and went immediately to sleep.

CHAPTER VIII

CALL OF THE REEF

THE sun was shining down through the companion, when I woke that day to lie incredulous for a moment on the bunk, listening to the many small protests of the *Shark* as she met the seas, and wondering if my situation was quite real. Did all adventure entail this sense of utter loneliness, this feeling that one was cast adrift in a world to be forever empty of all that was intimate and dear? I got up, almost doubting that I would find Charles at the tiller, dreading that in all this still and forlorn wasteland I would find myself alone. Not yet quite convinced of the reality of wind and wood and movement, I looked out the companion. Then the shreds of nightmare all dropped from me, for Charles, his freckled face serene, was lounging in the cockpit, whistling softly as he studied a map.

The map was a small one of California and Mexico that appeared on the back of our chart of San Francisco Bay. Charles ran a finger down the coastline and pointed to the dots in the ocean off Santa Barbara.

"We got to get to them," he said. "We can run in at night, fill our watertank and be off. I don't think anybody lives on them

so we'll be safe enough—'specially at night."

The islands that he pointed to were San Miguel, Santa Rosa and Santa Cruz forming the outer barrier of the Santa Barbara channel. We both knew something of them from our study of California history in school. They lay about thirty-five miles off the coast and in early days a cove on Santa Rosa had been used by shipmasters to careen their vessels. Charles figured that if we ran south all day and on the next morning set a course to the southeast we should sight the islands late in the day or during the night, for the moon would be nearly full.

Along in the afternoon it grew so hot that we stripped to the waist and went barefoot, as we intended to go the rest of our voyage. And, since we planned to make land so soon, we drank our water freely. Later on, before Charles went below to sleep, the wind died off a little, so we hauled the gaff topsail, staysail and flying jib out of the stern locker and bent them all on. The *Shark* responded like a whippet; her bowsprit came up higher and at times it seemed that only her rudder remained in the water as we went leaping along due south.

Just before the sun set, when I was alone in the cockpit, I was startled to see a sail to landward. Before I thought I twisted the flapped like mad and the boom swung in tiller sharply, so that our whole load of sail wrenching so that the blocks screamed. By the time I had put her in the wind again the sail I had sighted was gone and I realized that it must have been the topgallants of a ship beating up the coast and at the extreme end of a westward tack.

The sunset was the most magnificent I had ever seen and long after the sea grew dark I was still full of its glory. As the moon came up I sang, resting my head on the edge of the cockpit and staring up. The wind was freshening and clouds were whisking by overhead and the wind moaned, chasing us, as if it were talking to the *Shark* which would not tarry a moment to reply but ran on faster with fear-

filled sails, straining to be away. Lying there, I thought of a translation from Heine. Dead elegant words when I memorized them as a school task, they now had life and meaning and I repeated them, marveling that there had been other men upon the ocean in other times with feelings like my own:

"Before me rolleth a waste of water . . . and above me go rolling the storm clouds, the formless dark gray daughters of the air, which from the sea in cloudy buckets scoop up the water, ever wearied lifting and lifting, and then pour it again in the sea, a mournful, wearisome business. Over the sea, flat on his face, lies the monstrous, terrible Northwind, sighing and sinking his voice as in secret, like an old grumbler, for once in a good humor, unto the ocean he talks, and he tells her wonderful stories."

I came out of my reverie only when the whining stays made me realize that the *Shark* was straining too hard. The sea was building up behind us and there was going to be a blow. I called Charles and we stripped her to the mainsail, jib and staysail; and we were just in time. As Charles came back off the bowsprit the first of the squall with rain in its teeth caught up with us.

It rained with the wind raging hard and gusty for several hours and then it passed over us, going south. After it the sea was rough but the wind, coming gentle, was so sweet and salty that it made me giddy to smell of it and, just as on land, all seemed buoyant and refreshed by the shower.

NEXT day we hauled up all sails again and steered to the southeast, keeping a lookout on the weather side for land and on all sides for ships. As the afternoon passed and we sighted nothing we came around due east. We were both afraid that we had sailed past the islands and the thought that we had less than a gallon of water left was already making my mouth constantly dry.

Toward evening we saw what appeared to be a mist on the horizon before us and

Charles swore that it was land, but I was not so sure. My faith in the accuracy of the compass while under weigh, and our ability to even roughly check our position, had deserted me. But I hoped it was land—any land. And sailing on east as darkness fell we were both silent, listening and staring ahead, wondering what the night would bring.

"Even if we hit the coast," Charles said once, "we'll run along until we see a likely place. Then we can anchor and go in for water. If everything goes all right, we can do it and be out at sea again before daylight. Even if we have to get the water in a town we can do it."

Although not without its appeal, this seemed risky. "We'll have to be very careful," I said.

"Well, I hope we don't have to go near a town," Charles said. "I hope we see the islands pretty soon when the moon comes up."

But before the moon appeared we realized that its light would not be all that we had hoped for. We could see the stars, but they were blurred by mist.

"It's a light land fog," Charles maintained. "We must be getting real close in."

As the moon rose we furled all but the mainsail and the jib and went along more sedately. And after an hour or two of it I began to see mountains in the gray, deceiving light ahead and the noise of our wash began to sound like breakers. I went below to make some coffee, and I was sitting in the forepeak watching it boil and getting sleepy when I heard Charles call out to me. I ran aft to the companion and stuck my head out, and he said, "Listen."

At first there was nothing, it seemed, but the sounds of our running, but presently I was aware of an overtone, of a noise, or a whisper, that was like that which is made when the pages of a book are riffled quickly. It was constant and, once I had identified and separated it from all the other sounds, it seemed quite loud, but I could not tell from what quarter it came.

"It's surf," I whispered—"land."

Charles said, "It seems like it's south

to me. If it's south it must be San Miguel Island." He swung the tiller. "I'm going to steer that way."

I RETURNED to the galley and brought back two tin cups of coffee. When I climbed up onto the deck the sound was unmistakable, yet it did not have the regular flux of surf; it seemed more like water in chaos.

"It sounds just like the coffee did when it was boiling," I told Charles.

"Breakers might sound that way if there were a lot of rocks around," he said, thoughtfully. "You better go forward and watch. Sing out if you see the island, or a rock, or anything that looks funny."

I went up and crouched on the bitts and almost immediately I saw what appeared to be a shadow on our lee.

"Land ho!" I yelled before I was quite certain that it was.

"Where, away?" Charles cried promptly.

"Off the lee bow," I said. "At least it looks like land." And as I stared it became evident that it was land. The dark mass of it was cone-shaped and on either side tapered off into the gray limbo of sea and mist. It was an island.

"It must be San Miguel," Charles called. "We've made it! We picked it right out of the ocean. Why, I bet we can do the same with the South Sea Islands, not using anything but this little old compass here."

The sound of boiling, with its connotation of water in frenzy, grew steadily louder until it seemed to me that we must be sailing toward a great cauldron instead of an island. But only a few hundred yards before us now I could see high nude cliffs, their tops lost in mist and their feet smoky with sea spume. Then, not fifty feet from the bowsprit tip, the water shot up suddenly, white and frothy, a smoothly gleaming swell turned over with a glimpse of heaving flank, and then the dark contours of a rock ripped a jagged hole in the sea fabric and reared up, shaking off spray.

"Rocks to starboard!" I cried, my voice almost smothered by the increasing din.

Charles brought her over and we came on. "Rocks! Rocks!" I screamed. "Rocks to the larboard!"

Again we twisted, driving now directly for the cliffs and it was as if we were suddenly sailing in a thunder cloud. The *Shark* quivered with the concussion of it and Charles' voice scarcely reached me.

"Come about!" he was crying. "We got to come about!"

I ran aft and as Charles swung the tiller over it seemed to take all of his strength. The boom crossed sluggishly and we appeared to stagger backward as we doubled over. The water around us was chewed-looking and phosphorescent now and the cliffs were so close that I could see the sweat trickling down their crenelations.

We seemed to make no progress on our new tack, and I think we both must have realized then that we were trapped. We were in the toils of a current that was stronger than our wind, and if we were ever to escape at all it would have to be at the mercy of the current.

CHARLES' face appeared to me framed in a halo of twining mist. His damp hair fell like coiling serpents around his ears and brow and his eyes looked sulphurous and otherworldly with their excitement and fear. It was as if he were dead and floating in a nothingness and his mouth was open screaming, but I could not hear him.

Finally, as I stood stricken trancelike in the sea inferno, he gestured frantically. We were coming out again; we were going to give over our destiny to the current.

This time I clung to the mast and pointed when I saw the rocks. In such manner we wore swiftly past the cliffs again and around a point, with Charles trying gradually to ease the *Shark* away from the island. But each time it seemed we might win free of the current more rocks cropped up on the weather side and we were forced to keep to our circle. Past the point the cliffs ended, and there were bluffs tumbling pell-mell to the sea edge and thrusting rocky fingers out at us.

Rocks! We dodged like a shuttle through them, heeling and pitching crazily with the water spurting in the scuppers.

It may have been a quarter of an hour that we ran that way with the current tossing us along ever more recklessly, until the rocks sprang up before us so suddenly that there was scarcely time for me to point them out and for Charles to steer clear. They gleamed on all sides, jagged volcanic chunks, and my teeth were constantly on edge, prepared for the shock of one of them tearing into our hull.

And it was in those moments, seeming hours, that I considered death as something that might happen to me. It was so near; I could hear it in the hoarse voice of the plunging water and see it waiting, sulking darkly, in the mist. And I wondered, too, that I felt no fear but only a regret that I must die without my father ever knowing just how it was. Far more than myself I pitied the *Shark*, no longer free to run before the wind and flaunt the sea, but caught by it, harried, doomed, and shrieking in every timber with her pain.

Now it was ready for us, it loomed ahead, the last of us—rocks. I flung my arm in a despairing circle at them and saw beyond a vast field of white where the sea bubbled and sang like soda. There was no passage; there was nothing but rock ahead, an impregnable reef. Yet the *Shark* met the challenge gallantly, her bowsprit swooped round toward the island and her keel scraped as we flung along the barrier. Ahead, between more upthrusts I could see the glint of a beach and the broken backs of combers staggering up and down it. Then we swung again and were shot suddenly through the barrier, altogether out of control, full of wild momentum and bobbing on the field of white.

At last it was there, the rock that was to have us for its own; it hunched its scarred shoulders casually and the bowsprit crumpled like paper before my eyes. Then we climbed it with the bow timbers splintering on it and, flung to my knees, I shuddered as if it were my own bones breaking.

The stays had all snapped and down below the mast was crackling. I jumped to rip the lashings off the dinghy, noticing that Charles was sitting motionless in the misty cockpit staring upward at the mast-head. I had the dinghy almost free when he leaped forward, seized me, and threw me to the deck. But it was of no use. When the mast and the boom and all the rigging went, we went, too. The deck tilted perpendicularly and we were thrown into the water, fettered with ropes and threshing on the mainsail.

CHAPTER IX

HYMN AT MIDNIGHT

FOR awhile the tangled gear and the *Shark* hung together, then the *Shark* rolled free, snapping her lines, and we were left clinging to the mast, with sails, boom and wreckage trailing out behind us. The *Shark* drifted off, her bow lurching under and her stern high in the air. That was the last we saw of her; a current that clutched at our feet was moving us across the chuckling incandescent water toward the island and we were soon sucked out of it, scraping around a rock to where the sea reformed itself for its march up the beach.

I don't know why we did not then desert the mast and its tangle and swim in. Perhaps it was because we had for so long trusted to the mast and were intimate with every rope that trailed from it. At any rate, we continued to cling to it, paddling, until we came to the point where the waves crested and there a swell caught us and we surged forward.

The mass of rigging was suddenly alive and unmanageable, and as we shot toward the beach the boom swung upright in the churn and Charles was suddenly no longer beside me. Then my knees grated on the sand and he brushed against me limply. I caught him and staggered out of the after-suck. I got to where the sand was dry and then I set him down and myself fell prone. The beach was pitching up and down and I felt an uncontrollable impulse to be sick.

For a moment I lay weakly retching the

salt, sulphurous-tasting water while the beach continued to tilt beneath me. Charles turned over in the sand and groaned and then lay with his eyes open.

"You all right now?" I asked when I was able.

He got to his feet and walked unsteadily to where the mast and rigging had been tossed up. For a while he stood looking out beyond the surf and then he slumped on the mast and put his head in his hands. Recovering from my nausea, I walked up and down, getting used to the feel of the land and trying to see what lay above the beach.

The shelf where the sea had cast us appeared to be about a hundred yards in extent and sloped steeply back to meet a thicket. There was no light and no sign that anyone else had ever set foot on the beach; it was all silent, barren, and, I was convinced, uninhabited.

I started toward Charles but halted when I saw that he was still sunk in hopeless grief. I walked on toward where an out-thrust of rock sheared off the beach, and I had not advanced far when a sound welled out from the heights above us. It was a sound that checked my muscles in the midst of a step.

It was a voice singing that I heard. From the north it came drifting down, intermittently clear, then fading, and it was for a moment terrifying. Briefly, as a wave slacked off, it rang in my ears, full of a wild ardent beauty that made the familiar hymn seem strange and full of new meaning:

*"Chris-tian seek not yet repose,
Hear thy guar-dian An-gel say;
Thou art in the midst of foes: . . ."*

Like a shadow, Charles appeared at my side. His eyes were turned up toward the cliffs and his fingers gripped my arm.

" . . . Watch . . . and pray!"

THE voice faded then, going away from us and leaving just a hint of melody and warning in the wind. And after a mo-

ment it seemed likely that I had imagined it.

"You heard?" I asked Charles. "There was someone singing, wasn't there?"

He nodded. "I never heard anyone sing like that."

"Who do you suppose it was?"

"Whoever it was, they must live here on the island."

"But it doesn't seem like they'd go around at night singing hymns," I said.

We looked at one another uneasily. Our eyes strayed up toward the dark unknown region above the beach, and I shivered in my wet clothes.

"Let's build a fire," I suggested.

Charles did not move. "We haven't any matches," he said, and he stared out at the water, his face full of despair. "We haven't got anything. Not anything any more."

"Well," I said finally, "we got ourselves. And they haven't caught us yet. And we'll still get to the South Sea Islands."

"Oh, Dave!" he cried. "It was all my fault. I should have known better than to come right at the island that way at night. We should have hung off until I saw how it was. I broke her up just as sure as if I did it with an axe."

"You didn't mean to," I said. "And what's done is done. We're not beat yet. Not by a—not by a damn sight!"

Charles shrugged. "I hope not," he said. "Anyway we won't have much till morning, till we can see what kind of a place this is and who lives here. First off we'd better see if we can find somewhere we can lie down and maybe sleep a while."

Since the beach ended in rock just ahead of us, we turned back and walked south. We were silent, each quite despondent, and it seemed to me that the future could offer nothing but misery. It would have been more fitting, I thought, to have stayed with the *Shark* and ridden her gloriously to the bottom of the ocean. My words to Charles, designed to cheer him, had been brave and optimistic, but I felt that there was no truth in them. The South Sea Islands were again only an impossible dream; the sea

had utterly overwhelmed us and then contemptuously flung us aside.

We stopped when we came to the mast and dragged it, along with the sand-laden sails and rigging, higher on the beach. Continuing, we saw that the thicket edging the narrow border of sand occasionally gave way to a sandstone formation which was pocked by dark caverns. Further along a hump of this sandstone coursed down from the interior of the island to the water, thus terminating the beach at the south.

There was a path in the soft rock which we climbed, coming upon a stream which tumbled down the slope. But when we tasted of the water we found it rank and unpalatable with sulphur. Beyond us the island rose and curved off sharply, presenting to the sea—as it did on its northern extremity—only reefs, foam-girt rocks and tall, mist-hung cliffs.

We could proceed no farther and neither of us mentioned the possibility of exploring the interior of the island at night.

"Let's try one of the caves up there," Charles suggested. "They'd be dry, and warmer than the beach."

I had thought of that, but had promptly discarded the idea. Bats were in caves, and bones and animals. Who knew what strange monsters might be lurking there—on this island where hymns were sung on the cliffs at night, where the water boiled like a pot and shone like fire and whose vicious currents lured vessels into the destroying maw of the rocks. But I could not confess my fear of the caves, and I thought: after all, nothing can happen to us now, for everything horrible has already happened.

"All right," I said, and I climbed after Charles.

There *were* bones; they gleamed on the sandy shelf at the cave's mouth; and inside the walls shone with the same phosphorescent light that covered the sea in that churning field where we had lost the *Shark*.

Charles advanced into the cave a few steps and peered toward the back of it.

Suddenly there was movement there and a moment later we cringed as a huge dark bird flapped past us and swooped out over the beach.

"Just a bird," I said shakily.

Charles swallowed hard and sat down on the cave's floor. From its eminence we could see all the rocks and the phosphorescent stretch, and for awhile we both strained our eyes, looking for the *Shark*. But there was no sign of her—no timber of flotsam to show that she had ever been there.

I lay back in my sodden clothes, and the moment I did so my exhaustion pinned me down. Nothing mattered or would ever matter so long as I could close my eyes and lie still, not worrying, not thinking, not looking forward.

Yet my sleep teemed with bizarre insistent congeries: the gray peaceful face of the dead; Jeremy Robb, gallows-bound, his mouth laughing, cheating fate; a stark wasteland of sea on which I sailed alone forever; and, always, my father's sad dark eyes boring into my soul, probing me, asking and asking, "Why, David? Why oh why?" And all the agonizing night my aunt Kate made prim tinklings on the piano while a voice-like wind moaned on endlessly, "Chris-tian seek not yet repose. . . ."

"YOU'RE fighting again," Charles' voice said, remotely, wearily. "You're yelling and fighting in your sleep."

Once more he was shaking me, and I opened my eyes.

It was day, or what must pass for day; cold, with the northeasterly brisk and arrogant again, poking in the cave and bay-ing along the beach. The sky was overcast and there was a low continuous rumble of thunder from the rocks and half-buried reefs. The walls of the cave dripped, gulls executed their lonely vigil over the surf, and while we both sat, winking back sleep and looking out at the depressing sea prospect, there floated down from the island behind us the sharp report of a gun.

Charles sprang to his feet. I got up, went to the mouth of the cave and looked cautiously up and down the beach.

"What do you suppose they were shooting at?" Charles wondered. "Who do you suppose lives here?"

"I don't know," I said, "maybe Indians."

"We got to find out."

"And have them get us! No—we better lie low and see what's what, and when we do see we have to find another boat and get away from here."

Charles' eyes gleamed and I noticed the bruised blue skin on his forehead. "Whoever they are they ought to have a boat," he said. "They probably keep it over at the other side of the island. That's probably the side to land on—the side we should of come up on."

"On the lee!"

"That's right," he admitted. "I didn't think of that. Maybe you're not supposed to land here at all. But there must be a boat. You couldn't very well live on an island without any boat. You couldn't go anywhere."

"Maybe they don't."

"Oh, come on. What's the use of us talking here in this cave. Let's go and see." He went out and stood on the shelf. "We can go up that little stream we saw last night," he said. "We'll keep down in the brush and be careful so they won't see us first."

I followed him out and we scrambled down to the beach. Charles paused by the mast and the tangle of rigging. He looked at it unhappily for a moment and then said, "They might see that. We better put it in the cave."

"It's no good to us now."

"You can't tell if it is or not. Anyway I'm going to hide it where nobody'll see it and maybe take it." He bent over and began to unravel the mess of ropes, and there was nothing for me to do but set to work and help him.

We coiled all the rope, unreeved the sails and then lugged all of it up and put it far back in the cave. It was terrific labor getting the heavy mast up to the shelf and,

as I was carrying the end that reached the cave first, I had to stagger back into the reeking dark. There seemed no end to the cavern, and far beyond me as I sensed it plunging into the depths of the island I thought I heard the sound of water rushing along.

BY THE time we were finished spreading out the canvas so it would not mould, a light rain had begun to fall. We skirted the edge of the beach until we came to the stream and started following it along a sandstone gully which wound up through the brush. Our bare feet were swollen and cracked from the salt water. Small stones and dead spiny brush soon made them raw and bleeding, and we ascended the gully with the rain trickling on faces that winced frequently with pain. But we were greatly heartened when, coming around an angle, we saw ahead of us a woods that covered the summit of the slope.

Charles panted, "Gosh. I could eat a squirrel raw. Maybe there are squirrels and rabbits up here."

I stopped, partially sheltered by the over-hanging brush, and picked a thorn from my foot. "I'm thirsty, too," I said. "I hope there's water."

"There's a whole stream of water right in front of you."

"That stuff! It tastes like matches."

"It's good water. Why my grandfather went clear to Europe once and took baths in it at a place there and drank it all the time. And when he came back to San Francisco he had bottles of it sent back to him and he wouldn't drink any other water at all. Lots of people do that."

"Why didn't he just come here?" I wondered.

"I guess he didn't know about this place."

I stared down at the stream thoughtfully. "We could bottle this," I said. "Then people wouldn't have to get it clear from Europe and they could take a bath right here. Why—I bet we'd make a fortune at it!"

Charles laughed suddenly and it seemed a strange sound; neither of us had really laughed for so long. "You would think of that," he said. "Come on. Let's get us a squirrel."

A little farther and we were on level ground in the shelter of trees. They were chiefly live oaks, varied occasionally by the gleaming red trunks of mandrone and tall mottled tanbark. Under them it was dry and very still; the sound of the sea was gone and we could hear the sulphurous brook gurgling cheerfully, although the air was evil with the smell of it. Farther on through the trees we came to a basin of rock where the brook boiled up out of the ground. Beyond that was a spring, mossy and fern-grown, and after sampling its water I drank my fill. It was fresh, the water so energized and bubbly that it tasted carbonated. From it a stream also poured, running down a narrow tree-clad valley on the lee side of the island.

When I finished drinking and got to my feet I saw that Charles had shelled an acorn and was nibbling at it. He spit it out.

"Bitter," he said.

"We got to eat," I said. "Even if we have to go up to whoever lives here and ask them for something. Say! How are they going to know who we are? They won't know what we've done."

"We'll see what they look like first," Charles replied calmly.

"I'd like to get dry sometime," I complained. "It wouldn't be so bad if we just had some matches and could make a fire."

Charles started walking off through the trees to the south, limping, and careful where he placed his feet.

"Down this way—the valley," I called to him. "That's prob'ly where they live."

He put a finger to his lips and motioned to me to come on. "I smelled smoke from down that way," he told me when I caught up with him.

"Well then, let's go down that way," I said.

But he kept on walking south. "We better be real careful," he said. "Remember

that shot we heard, and that crazy singing last night. You can't tell what they're like, so we'll find out as much as we can about the island first and then we'll sneak down that valley and see what we can see there."

WE KEPT on until the trees thinned out on a rocky rain-swept bluff and we looked down and saw the water far below. Our island was roughly boat-shaped with high promontories at the stern and bow and low brush-covered land in the waist. I computed the length then as being about three miles and the beam perhaps two at its greatest, and later on I learned that my estimate was nearly correct.

Charles turned. "Well," he said, "we'll try the valley. I'm getting so I don't care much what happens as long as I get something to eat."

I felt that way, too, and as we reentered the woods I was almost buoyant with the prospect of food—food at any price. We had just reached the springs when there was suddenly a crashing in the woods ahead of us. Charles dragged on my arm.

"Behind this tree!"

We got behind a large tanbark and peeked out from it. The sounds of a heavy progress through the leaves and brush continued, and then there was a sinister kind of snort, a suddenly expelled challenge that seemed to me the most frightening noise I had ever heard. Trembling, I brought my jackknife out of my pocket and snapped it open just as a dark form pranced out into the open before us and stood braced for combat, staring at me steadily with vicious little eyes.

It was a hog, a lean powerful boar. Charles snorted loudly, mimicking the noise the hog had made and this provoked it into a short charge in our direction, but it swerved off before it got to us and went crashing on through the woods.

"Bacon," Charles said wistfully, stepping out from the tree.

I put my knife back in my pocket, feeling rather silly, and we went on. We went down the wooded valley along the stream,

walking cautiously and stopping to listen every few moments. There was a trail, well defined from use, its mud chewed by the pugs of swine, but we were perhaps halfway down the slope before we stopped, both staring at the clear imprint of a boot.

It had a profound effect on us, that casual track. For days we had lived in a world empty of mankind and we had already developed the wariness of the hunted, an instinctive aversion for human contact. I was conscious of a tautness in my chest and I forgot my hunger. The singer and the sound of a shot were now telescoped into a footprint.

"It's not very big," Charles said presently. He put his own foot next to it, comparing them. And that was all; we advanced, but we moved more slowly and I had a ridiculous feeling that eyes were watching me.

As we went, we followed the footsteps, though, I think, hardly aware that we were doing so.

The deep voice of the sea had now drowned out the minor burbling of the stream, and we could see the uneasy plane of it, but far out, not where it met the island. Soon we came to a cleared place where several orange trees had been planted and the ground around them turned recently with a spade. The fruit was small and green but I picked one and as we moved on, I peeled it with my knife. Suddenly Charles threw himself in the mud.

"Down!" he hissed at me.

As I dropped I caught a glimpse of the rude roof of a cabin and a rock chimney with smoke straggling out, mingling with the drizzle. We crawled on into some grass and manzanita and peered through.

WE WERE, we discovered, at the edge of a small bluff and below us, partially screened on all sides by large oaks, was a cabin. It was built of logs turned white with age and weathering, but was very neatly constructed and in good repair. Behind it were stacks of split wood and a chopping block with an axe

stuck in it. There was also a shed built of logs and a rough pen where some hens were out scratching in the rain-damp earth. Past the cabin the stream scrambled whitely toward a cove and we could observe that the sea was gentle there because, as on the island's weather side, a girdle of rocks broke up the swells, but here the girdle bound the land more tightly and a surf had no chance to form.

We lay there watching the cabin and not speaking. But after a bit I began to imagine the things to eat in there and I thought how fine it would be to sit before that fire inside and smell food cooking. I was just about to suggest that we go down and knock on the door when a figure that had been hidden by the trees moved and became visible in the cove. It was a man, short, and made bulky by the pea-jacket he was wearing. He was bareheaded and his back was toward us, but I could see that he was examining a piece of driftwood he held. Presently he tossed it down. It was the stern and a part of the side of a small boat and it looked to me as if that boat had been our dinghy.

Charles put a hand on my arm and whispered, "Must be the man that made that track."

But I scarcely knew that he had spoken. I was already stiffening with foreboding. There was something about the bearing of that small man in the cove that was like an echo to me; there was something about the long dark hair. . . .

And then he turned and was facing us for a moment and the shock was as great as if he had suddenly whipped out a pistol and fired at us. He was frowning and his face was full-bearded, but I would have recognized him even if there had been no flesh on his features. He was Jeremy Robb.

CHAPTER X

OLD MAN OF THE ISLAND

LYING there numbed in the brush, I knew that vast sardonic forces moved the universe and with an infinite

attention to detail worked out their patterns. Else how was I come here, to this speck in all the world, to stare at Jeremy Robb again?

Charles was slower to recognize the figure on the beach. I heard him suck in his breath and he whispered, "You know who that looks like?"

"It's him," said I with a fatalistic calm. "It's Jeremy Robb."

"Robb!" Charles said. "Oh, Lord." He stared at me. "Of all the people in the world it has to be him. Now we'll have to keep on hiding. We're trapped, Dave—trapped on this island with him!"

I was recovering from my shock which had not been one of fear but of wonder. "He won't hurt us," I said. "I'll bet he won't. He's just like we are. Remember how he laughed that day at the landing?"

"Are you crazy? He's a pirate. A murderer!"

"And so are we," I reminded him.

The rain had suddenly begun to fall with more purpose and we saw Robb wheel from looking seaward and hurry toward the cabin. Then we heard a door slam at the front.

We listened for a while. The rain drenched us and Charles said, "I suppose you want to go down and knock at that door there?"

"It would be better than this," I told him. But, even starving, I knew that I would not approach the cabin.

"Then go ahead!" he cried, sitting erect. "Me—I'll take my chances. I did nothing really wrong, even if people back in San Francisco may be thinking differently now—even if it looks that way. But I know I haven't and I'm not going throwing in with those who have. He'd prob'ly kill us anyway. But if you want to go down there, go ahead."

"Maybe I will," I said, goaded by this outburst. "What right do you have to say Robb did wrong? How do you know anyway? I feel very sorry for him."

Now we were both on our feet, our wet hair streaming down our faces, our soaked and sea-rimed clothes hanging sod-

den on our limbs. We stood there on the rain-swept bluff, all else forgotten but our difference.

Charles stared at me with intense scorn. "Sorry!" he mocked tensely. "*Sorry* for him. You sound just like a woman! You're just wet and hungry and you can't stand it— that's all that's wrong with you."

There was suddenly no breath in me and I was trembling. Fury swarmed in my throat. Me! "How about *you*?" I gasped cruelly. "You with your mother to tuck you into bed and kiss you every night?"

His face was close to mine, ghastly pale, with his eyes burning. "You can't say that! You can't say it!"

"Oh, can't I though?" I mocked him. "Well, I said it and I'll say what I like to say and you can run around and hide in the rain like a rabbit. I'm going down there. I'm not scared of Jeremy Robb or any—" My breath choked off in a kind of sob and I looked stupidly down at the cabin.

I SAW an old man, his white beard reaching to his stomach and a broad grass hat on his head. He was standing by the chopping block gazing up at us. Charles, noticing my absorption, turned and saw him, too, and we three stood there in the rain, staring. The old man was wearing a long white tunic that looked as if it had been made from some animal's skin, and there were sandals on his feet. He glanced over his shoulder at the door of the cabin and then grimaced at us and beckoned, advancing a step or two.

For a moment we hesitated on the edge of the bluff while the old man, with repeated gesturings and quick glances back at the cabin, approached. In my overwrought condition he was a macabre, frightening figure with his outlandish costume and his grimacing. And as he advanced I found myself retreating. Then in abrupt accord we were running, Charles and I, fleeing up the muddy slope toward the woods.

We halted when we came to the springs, spent, and our breath sighing through lips

drawn taut with fatigue. But we heard nothing, only the soft movements of birds and small animals in the dripping brush.

Charles looked at me and then away. "I thought you were going down there," he said.

"I didn't know *he* was there," I panted— "that old man. He looked like he was—crazy."

Charles shrugged. "Sure he was. So's Robb, too, prob'ly. I know that *I'm* not going to have anything to do with them." He paused, looking around the woods. "I'm going back to the cave."

He started off and after a moment of hesitation, I hurried after him. "What are you going to do?" I asked.

"Never mind," he told me loftily. "I'll figure out something."

I followed him back down the sulphurous gully we had climbed shortly before, not speaking and acutely sensitive of the tension between us. The rain seemed to fall now with a vindictive delight and it was sickening to think that I was only returning to a damp cave, a place where there would be no fire to dry by and nothing to relieve my hunger. But it was then, soaked, my feet raw, starved and wholly miserable, that I first tapped a reservoir of fortitude, a kind of ultimate courage, that I was not aware I possessed. I only know that—at a moment when I could have cried out with sheer wretchedness—I was suddenly inspired to make a vow to myself that I would bear whatever was in store for me without complaint. Charles would never again have cause to accuse me of softness; indeed, I would make him marvel at my hardihood. If this dreary privation was the lot of one who went adventuring, then I would endure it, for I had invited it; and, even dying, no lament would escape me.

THE cave when we reached it did seem a sort of a haven; at least now we were out of the rain and wind. While Charles sat near the entrance staring speculatively out at the sea I removed my sweater and shirt and wrung them out. I did not put them on again but hung them on a rock

that jutted out from the cave's wall. It was more comfortable, I found, to be naked above the waist than sodden.

As Charles continued to sit with a look of deep concentration on his face I moved about my work. For I had a plan. If he could figure something out, so could I—I *had*, and I wanted to get it under way before he thought of it.

I took the end of one of the ropes we had coiled and, cutting off a few feet of it, began to unravel it and braid it into a cord. Once Charles glanced at me curiously, but he did not ask me what I was doing even when, having finished making my cord, I ducked out of the cave to return presently with a small limb of manzanita.

Using my length of braided hemp, I made a bow of the limb and then gathered some of the bleached pieces of driftwood that lay around the cave. One piece I whittled roughly cylindrical with a point at one end of it, and I hollowed another small block in the center so that the blunt end of the cylinder fitted into it. Finally I scraped a large piece of driftwood with my knife until I had accumulated a small pile of fine shavings. Now, I imagined, I was all ready to produce a fire, as the Indians did it.

I made a loop around the cylinder with the bow-string and, holding the hollowed piece on top, I began to saw, making the cylinder point revolve in a tiny hole in the driftwood.

Charles watched me for a while and then got to his feet and left the cave. When my arm got tired I stopped sawing and felt the point of the cylinder. It was warm and so was the hole in the block, but the possibility of the shavings bursting into flame began to seem quite remote.

I got up and looked out of the cave, and after a moment I saw Charles. He was standing out on the rocky point at the north end of the beach and as I watched him, a wave wet him to the waist, but as it ebbed he bent down and tore some mussels from the rocks and stuffed them into his pockets. I returned to my driftwood

and began to saw again. Working, my mouth began to water at the thought of mussels roasted on the end of a stick. No, it would be better just to place them in the coals and let them cook in their own juice.

By the time Charles returned, I was slumped down exhausted. He glanced at the evidence of noncombustion and then emptied the mussels from his pockets. Sitting down, he tore a piece from his shirt and began to dab the sand from a bloody gash in his instep.

"Your wood's too damp," he observed after a moment. "That's why you can't get it started. And you got to have tinder, too—real dry shavings or grass."

"I guess that's it. It was good and hot but it wouldn't blaze." I looked at his foot. "You'd better wrap that up."

"It's nothing. I wish we had a fire. I was going to cook those mussels for us."

"Maybe we could get some dry wood. We could find a dead log up by those springs and bring it down here. If we dug down inside it would be real dry."

Charles sighed and lay back. "I couldn't walk up there again now—not with this foot."

"I'll go," I said.

HE sat up and looked at me. "What's the use? Dave, why should we fool ourselves?"

"What do you mean? If I make a fire and we cook these mussels you got, that's all right, isn't it?"

"Sure. It's all right, but I doubt if we can ever make a fire. And anyway, they're going to find us. We can't live here on this island very long without Robb and whoever else is in that cabin coming after us."

I didn't answer him right away. When I did, I tried to sound a lot more hopeful than I felt. I said:

"Maybe we won't have to be on this island very long. When we find their boat we'll take it and clear out of here."

"Well," he said, "I don't think they have a boat. You know, I think maybe Robb is in a fix just like we are. I think he was wrecked here and he hasn't any

boat to get away in. I don't think anybody would stay here that didn't have to, unless he was crazy."

"How about the old man we saw?" I asked. "And the cabin, and the orange trees planted down there? Somebody must live here."

"I think he does—the old man. And I think he's crazy. He's sure to of told Robb we're here. They're prob'ly out looking for us right now."

"They might as well wait till the rain stops," I said. "We're not going anywhere."

Charles began to grin and then to chuckle, and he sank back again laughing, and in a minute I was laughing, too, just as hard as he was. I didn't quite know why, only that it was all suddenly very funny and I felt warm inside, even if I was shivering. Now I didn't care about the fire or whether we had anything to eat.

"Let 'em come," Charles said finally. "Let them come here and I swear you'd scare them away. You look like you been dead and drowned for a week."

"I wonder what the fellows at school would say if they could see us now," I said. "Supposing they could just look into this cave for a minute and see us here like this."

Charles supported himself on an elbow. "What do you suppose they're saying about us now?"

"They likely think we're dead."

"Most of them would be dead! Take Grady or George Worth."

"They couldn't stand it," I agreed. "It would of got them by this time."

"Well, they wouldn't of had the nerve to start off in the first place. They don't know there is anywhere outside of San Francisco."

"It's the whole world to them."

"Yeah."

I reached over and picked up a mussel and threw Charles one. "Have a mussel."

He sat up. "Why not? They eat oysters raw."

We opened them with my knife, pulled the weed out, and then sat holding them,

looking at each other. It seemed almost pitiful the way my mouth was preparing itself for something to eat when all it was going to get was a raw mussel. I popped the mollusk in and gulped it down. Sea water and iodine, that's what it was like, with a sensation afterward of having swallowed something by mistake.

"Not bad," I said, and I opened another one.

WE each ate four and then, alarmed by spasms in my stomach, I went outside the cave and looked around. The rain had stopped, but a heavy mist, wet as drizzle, was rolling over the island. The sea was rough, the tide was high and flung itself curling up the beach. I had no idea what time it was, and decided I did not care; I felt reckless and light-headed, like the time I had drunk the dregs from all the champagne bottles when my father gave a party. And then, completing the similarity of the present to that occasion, I was sick to my stomach.

I went back into the cave, feeling giddier than ever, but weaker.

"I'm thirsty," Charles said, and even in my interesting condition, I realized that his voice was quite strange.

"I'll get you a drink," I volunteered promptly and had turned to leave the cave again before I realized that the nearest fresh water was up in the woods and that I had no vessel with which to carry any back.

I was looking around the floor, thinking that I might fashion a container of wood, when my glance rested on the sails. I went over and lifted up a corner of the jib. Charles was watching me.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to cut this," I said. "I got to have something to carry water in."

"I shouldn't ask you to do it. But gosh—" He stretched out flat. "I feel awful. I feel hot." He laughed. "That's funny—when I'm so cold."

I knew then that he must be sick because if he had felt like himself he would have protested my cutting the jib. I went

ahead and slit off a piece of the wet canvas and rolled it into a funnel, tying it at the bottom with the string from my bow. Then I punched two holes in the top and slipped a length of rope through for a handle.

"Watch out for Robb," Charles said.

"Don't worry," I told him, "they won't get me."

On my way up the gully I passed a bush with purple berries. I stopped and tasted one and although its flavor was not unpalatable, I spit it out, afraid it might be poisonous.

At the spring I filled my pockets with acorns, and I listened for a while before I dipped my canvas bucket. There was no sound of anything alive but me, yet at any moment I expected to see Jeremy Robb advancing through the mist with pistol leveled. Had it not been for the thought of Charles lying alone in the cave, coming down sick, I might have again gone down the valley to spy on the cabin; for I was still in an erratic mood, reckless and drunken with exposure and hunger, and feeling, too, a touch of fever.

My makeshift bucket bore the water with only a slight leakage and I arrived back at the cavern with about two quarts. But when I entered Charles was not there. I propped the bucket in the sand and then, my heart leaping suddenly with anxiety, I went to the entrance and looked up and down the murky beach. There was a sound in the cave behind me and Charles sat down heavily.

"I'VE been exploring," he said, his voice full of stupor. "Gosh—it goes back. It goes back forever, Dave. And there's a river—I heard it running back in there."

He bent and scooped water to his lips and he regarded me for a moment. His eyes were very bright, yet they seemed not to see me. "I'm sick," he whispered, and he fell back, his hands over his face.

There was nothing I could do for him but let him lie there in his soaking clothes. But after a few minutes he began to shiver with the fever sweat breaking out on his

forehead and he insisted that I cover him with the jib. I did it and the idea of having something over him seemed to make him feel better. He closed his eyes, breathing deeply, and did not regain consciousness until it was dark. I was standing at the mouth of the cave; the mist was swirling off and I could see a few stars.

"Dave!" Charles called.

"Yes?" I said, going back and kneeling beside him.

"If the sun would only shine," he said.

"It's clearing up. Maybe it will in the morning."

"I'll feel better then. We'll look over the rest of the island and we'll find some way out of this."

"We sure will," I said.

"I'm not a bit hungry now. Are you?"

"Not a bit. But tomorrow we'll eat. I bet you we do."

He closed his eyes and I stood up. "Look," he said. "I didn't mean that—what I said there this morning when we were watching the cabin. You've got more guts than I have. I know that. I was scared—scared of Robb."

"Hell," I said. "Oh, hell—forget it. I didn't mean what I said either. And I'm scared of Robb, too."

He smiled and in a minute he was snoring, lying on his back and shivering now and then and rasping through his nose. I was afraid he was pretty sick and I sat at the mouth of the cave wondering what to do, wondering what the morning would hold for us. I felt desperate and very lonesome without Charles to talk to, and I kept listening, thinking I might hear the voice singing on the cliffs again. I would have welcomed it.

When I felt I could sleep I went in and lay down and, after thinking it over, I decided to pray. I had prayed a lot before, but I had seldom been a petitioner of the Lord for anything definite since the time I had requested a bugle and gotten a book. But now I asked, with a good deal of emotion and remembered bits of pulpit rhetoric, for fire and food.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK



By LUKE SHORT
Author of "King Colt," etc.

The cabin was a wreck—
and Blackie had vanished

Some Dogs Steal

Introducing Blackie—the one-dog Reign of Terror. He was the hardest working huskie in the whole North Woods — but when he played, he played too rough

IN THE twelve years Gus and me been trapping together we never spent a Christmas in the bush. We'd start out in October with enough grub and shells to last us until March, swearing we would sit this Christmas out in the bush and let them fur buyers swindle the rest of the boys out of their fall hunt. We aimed to wait until Spring and then ship both our spring and fall hunt to a fur house.

We ain't ever done it yet, though. Along about the second week of December, Gus would get restless. He would say, "That stove is goin' to set this shack on fire some day. With all our fur in it, too." Or he

would set out a dozen number ought traps all over the shack until I was picking three of them off my toes before I could get from the bunk to the stove.

"Weasels," Gus would say. "I'm tryin' to keep 'em from gettin' at our fur. We ought to take it in."

Which was just another way of saying that he hadn't had a drink since October and he figured he was going to die if he didn't get one.

Every year his excuse was different, but it always got us to the post. Next year, though, Gus and me will spend Christmas in the bush. The reason I know is on account of what happened this year.

WHEN the second week in December come around this time, Gus got that look in his eye, and I knew what was coming. He would spend a long time looking at our fur, which was already baled and

up on the rafters of the shack, and then he would go out and look at the dogs, which was chained to the trees around the shack. He would do it five times a day, until one night after we'd finished feeding the dogs, he walks up to his wheel dog, Blackie, and stands there looking down at him, just shaking his head

"You got to worm him?" I says.

"I wisht it was that," Gus says, kind of gloomy.

"Why? What's the matter with him?"

"I just don't like the look of him," Gus says.

"I never have," I says. "But he don't look any different than usual."

"You mean you can't see that look in his eye?" Gus says, looking at me kind of pitying like.

"Sure I can," I says. "He looks like he'd steal the ten commandments and come back for the commas. He always does look like that."

"Not like now," Gus says. "I can tell it. He's been good too long." He looked at Blackie. "Ain't you, you black thievin' devil?"

The dog didn't hear. He was chewing away on a hunk of half-froze moose meat, not paying no attention to us.

He was a pretty sight, that Blackie. A well-built sled dog, heavy at the shoulders, with a flat wide skull and a chunky rump and a tail that was never out of curl. Every dog man that didn't know him wanted to buy him on sight. Every dog man that did know him wanted to shoot him on sight. He was just the damndest thief that ever lived.

Some dogs steal, and some dogs don't. He did. You could collar him with barbed wire and chain him with a logging chain to a tree a foot thick, but if he took a notion to get loose, he'd do it, choke collar or no choke collar.

But it was what happened after he got loose that made a man wild. He would chew the lacing out of the snowshoes first thing, and then if he was alone he'd get into the stoutest cache or shack that was ever built. He'd et his worth in grub and

destruction ten times over, and Gus knew it. But the dog was such a good worker Gus would overlook his thievin'. That is, he would when he wanted to, but he didn't want to now.

"Good too long?" I says. "He ain't been good since the day he was born."

"That's what I'm tryin' to tell you," Gus says. "He's due to bust loose."

"All right then, shoot him," I says. "It's either you or me someday, so you might's well do it now."

Gus looks at me and says, "If he ever gets in that shack with that fur, we're done for."

"It's on the rafters," I says.

"Don't make no difference. He'll get it."

"I'll take a chance," I says. "You can build you a cache and nail fish-hooks on the legs. I'll take a chance on mine."

And then it come. "I'd sure like to get that fur into the post before he busts loose," Gus says.

"Not my fur," I says. "I'd sooner give it to Blackie than them damn fur-buyers. Me, I'm sellin' in the spring." And I walks into the shack. I thought I'd fixed him for this Christmas. He wouldn't go in without me, on account of we always sold our fur together for a better price, and I wouldn't go in at all. I had him.

BUT that was before he caught the two black foxes. Ordinarily, a man can trap ten years without catching a black fox, but Gus got two and on the same trip. They was pretty things, big, with no white on them at all except the patch at the end of the brush and a smidgin of white hairs on the chest. Once they was on the stretchers that night, Gus says, "I can remember the day when them two pelts would have brought us six hundred dollars each. Now they'll bring us six."

"Eight if you wait till spring," I says.

"Danged if I'll sell them for that," Gus says. "That's the trouble with this country. A six-hundred-dollar pelt sellin' for six dollars. Why, I can remember when I used to take my silver foxes and hold 'em over a pitch fire to smudge the silver

so I could sell 'em for black. And now them crooks don't want black."

"It's progress," I says. And I brought out the cards, thinking it was ended. I should've known better. Any time I beat Gus five straight games of pinochle and he don't tell me I'm crooking him, there's something up. When we was ready to go to bed it come.

Gus all of a sudden snaps his fingers. "I got it," he says.

"Got what?"

"A way to beat them fur buyers. I'll raffle off them black foxes."

"Where?" I says.

He didn't look at me, but bent down to take off his moccasins. "Why, at the post. I'll take them in and leave them around Coffee's store for a couple days and let everybody look at them. Then I'll sell chances at a buck a throw. Lots of them birds around the post would like to give them foxes to their women folks for Christmas."

"Next Christmas?" I says. "We're here til March, ain't we?"

"This Christmas," Gus says, like his mind was made up. "It's got to be this Christmas on account of they'll want it for a Christmas present. I couldn't keep the skins through the summer anyhow."

Well, he had me there, all right, and inside a couple days I give in, like I knew I would. We made a trip around our lines, setting our snares high to take care of any snow that would come while we was gone, then loaded our fur in our toboggans and headed out for the post. Gus was feeling so good he offered to break trail all the way, and I let him, figuring it was all square because on the way back he'd feel so bad I'd have to do all the breaking.

Gus waited until we had a fire in our shack in town before he got drunk, which is what he come in for. But to make it look good he took the pelts down to old man Coffee's store to be raffled. Then he forgot the skins and everything else and I was feeding ten dogs and cooking three meals a day and the rest of the time I was chasin' him away from trouble.

Funny part of it was, people bought chances on the pelts. A true black fox is reasonable rare, and even if they can dye them Barren Lands white fox to look black, people who know fur like the real thing. At a dollar a throw it was cheap enough, and old man Coffee and me, between us, kept track of the sixty odd names and numbers. Gus, of course, made three trips a day to old man Coffee to get the money, and it was usually drunk up before night.

Three-four days before Christmas we'd sold all the chances we could so I took the pelts back to the shack and hung them on a nail on the wall over my bunk. Gus, of course, never noticed it, on account of he wasn't home much and when he was he wasn't noticing anything.

IT WAS two nights before Christmas, with the drawing on the foxes set for Christmas eve, that I reckoned it was time to round up Gus and get him home. I quit the rummy game in the beer parlor and started the rounds of Gus' hangouts. I found him out in back of the U-Eata Café with two thigh-bones of a moose. They was each about two feet long, weighing about four pounds apiece, and he was looking at them and swearing.

When I come up Gus says, "Funny, but I can't get these damn bones to clack like the fellas in the minstrel show do."

"They ain't flat enough," I says. "Come on home and I'll get you a couple of shovels and you can clack 'em."

"All right," he says. That's Gus. When he gets drunk he likes to spread out, and as long as you talk to him like he was Paul Bunyan, he's peaceable enough.

I got him home all right and set him on the bunk inside the door and went across to the table to light the lamp. I'd no sooner got it lit than Gus says in a funny voice, "Look."

I didn't have to. The room was in Hell's own uproar. Flour all over the floor, lard can busted into, and grub scattered from here to breakfast. The window that I hadn't locked was open, and with just that much to go on I knowed what had hap-

pened. With the snow banked up to the windows, it wasn't any trick.

So did Gus know. He says peacefully; "Well, he broke loose again. That damn dog will do that once too often."

Just then I looked over at my bunk. I says to Gus, "All right, you look, now. Over there."

Gus got up and went over to the bunk. There was the two fox pelts chewed into medium-sized ribbons. The dog had reached them from my bunk, pulled them down by their tails, and then just chewed on them until he got tired of them. Maybe for dessert, after the lard, I don't know.

Gus got sober quick enough. He let out a yell, and then raced for the rifle in the corner. He grabbed it up and levered a shell into it and headed for the door. I yells after him, "Be sure and shoot the right dog."

I wasn't worryin' though, because I knew that dog wouldn't be around. He'd hide out until he figured we'd cooled off enough not to kill him, just the way he'd done a dozen times before. Once he come back and took his trimmin' he'd work like a fool for a couple of months, and Gus would forget about it. Until the next time, that is. That dog was banking up more deaths for himself than a sack full of cats.

I DIDN'T hear no shot and pretty soon Gus come back. He put the rifle in the corner and come over and looked at the pelts and then sat down on the bunk and looked at me. He was plumb sober now.

"Look, Simmy," he says. "I know what you're thinkin'. Only I spent the money. I can't give it back."

"It looks like jail for you then," I says.

"You got any money?"

"No."

"You sold our fur. Where's that money?"

"While you been tankin' up," I says, "I paid back our fall credit and bought us grub and clothes and about seven dozen number one traps, and the whole lot was

freighted up to the loggin' camp two days ago where we can pick it up. Even if Coffee would take it back, you ain't got time to get it."

"You ain't got *any* money?"

"Two bucks."

We just looked at each other and Gus looked like he was goin' to cry.

"If you could get twelve bucks," I says, "you could go to Hudson's Bay and maybe Cruickshank would sell you a couple of black fox pelts for what he paid for 'em."

"There ain't another black fox been brought into the post this year," Gus says gloomily. "They told me."

"Then raise the ante and get a couple of silvers and smoke 'em."

"They're on to that," he groans. "Besides, silvers cost money."

"Borrow it," I says. "A guy that can use moose thighs for bones ought to be able to raise the price of a couple of skins."

His face got red. "Borrow?" he snorts. "I been settin' up this whole town to booze for a week. Nothin's too good for my friends. But when I'm broke do you think I can borrow a dime? No. Me, big-hearted Gus Tine. Everybody's friend—when he's in the money."

He looks at me to see how sorry I felt for him. I guess he could tell all right, because he looked awful miserable.

Finally, he says, "Simmy, you borrow the money."

"This raffle was your own idea," I says. "I don't want nothing to do with it. I run it for you. This is where I back out."

"Sergeant McLeod'll jail me," he moans.

"Sure he will," I says. "It's fraud, ain't it?"

He got sore then and shut up. While I cleaned up the mess, he went to bed. It was just like cabin fever. I could usually expect it about the middle of March, but if it was going to start at Christmas it would be tough.

Next morning, he didn't speak. It was like old times, both of us doing our job, gettin' the chores done, but not talking.

Halfway through breakfast there comes a knock on the door and Gus opened it. A kid was standing there holding a dog chain in his hand. On the other end of it was Blackie. He had his tail curled between his legs and his ears was flat and he looked like pure misery.

"This your dog, mister?" the kid asked Gus.

"I guess so," Gus said sourly.

"Well, he et up one of our chickens last night. He got the chain caught in the hen house, or we'd never have got him."

Gus says gloomily, "I bet it was a big chicken, wasn't it?"

"Yep. Ma says it'll cost you two dollars, or she'll take it to McLeod and it'll cost you five."

Gus looks at me. I give him our last two dollars. He give it to the kid and went out with him to chain up Blackie. I heard Blackie yelp once, as if Gus had fetched him a kick, and then Gus come back and ate his breakfast.

Afterward, he went out, still not speaking to me.

THE draw for the two pelts was set for eight o'clock that night at Coffee's. I went down and the store was pretty full of people. Sergeant McLeod, who had bought a chance, was there. Gus was sittin' on the counter by old man Coffee and his face was as close to green as it could get and still have him keep his dinner.

"Where's the skins, Gus?" somebody asked.

"Up at the shack," Gus says, smiling sort of sick like. "I figure they been handled too much." He looked at me, but I kept a straight face. There was murder in his eyes.

When the draw came, I was hoping it would be Sergeant McLeod. It was number fifty-six and when Gus and Coffee had to look at the list I thought Gus was goin' to faint. His hands was shakin' so that Coffee made him lay the paper down so he could read it.

"Vernon Pitcher," Old man Coffee says. "Is he in the store?"

Nobody answered, and I saw Gus let go his breath that he'd been holdin' for somewhere close to fifteen minutes.

"Who's he?" Gus asks.

"New fella. Up from Lac la Biche," somebody says. "He ain't here."

"Well, tell him about it and send him up to my place," Gus says. "Thanks, everybody."

Gus didn't get drunk that night. He was home and in bed before I was, and after the lamp was out I heard him thrash-in' around and moanin' in his sleep. Neither of us knew what kind of a man this Pitcher was, but Gus was goin' to find out.

We was just cleaning up before breakfast on Christmas morning when Pitcher come to the door.

"I hear I won them fox pelts," he says.

"Come in," Gus says.

This Pitcher steps in. He was a thin fella, kind of small, with a long, shrewd face and pale blue eyes. He shook hands with me, while Gus got out a bottle of Christmas cheer.

We all had a drink and talked fur and pretty soon this Pitcher starts to get restless.

Gus saw it and laid his cup down on the table. He had the dogged look about him of a man who was goin' to be thrown to lions and didn't want anything except to get it over.

"Well, it looks like you're takin' me to jail this mornin'," Gus announces.

Pitcher blinked. "How come?"

"I ain't got them pelts," Gus says grimly. "They was destroyed."

Pitcher just looked at him.

"I'm guilty," Gus says. "I'm willin' to take my medicine. Of course, I couldn't help it. You can't account for hurricanes and things like that, but I'll take my medicine."

"Hurricanes?" Pitcher says.

"That's right. A act of God, kind of," Gus says. "A man scrapes and slaves and has an idea and then when he thinks he's got enough put by to feed his body, some-thin' takes it away from him."

"What about them pelts?" Pitcher asked. He wasn't mad, just curious.

"The mice got at 'em. Ruined 'em," Gus said dismally.

"Mice?"

GUS got up. "Don't think I'm tellin' you this so I can keep the pelts," Gus says seriously. "Hell, would a man risk jail for that?" He went over and got a strip of the fox pelt and brought it over to Pitcher, who looked at it carefully.

"Your mice have got pretty big teeth."

"Oh that," Gus says, laughing. "They was no good after the mice got at 'em. We let the pups play with them."

Pitcher looked around to see if we had any pups, but Gus's face was troubled and honest looking. Gus says, "Well, let's go to McLeod. I defrauded you."

Pitcher says slowly, "Well, I don't guess we will. That's hard luck."

"But I cheated you!" Gus says. "I didn't mean to, of course. But there it is. You won two fox pelts and I can't pay you!"

"My chance only cost me a dollar," Pitcher says. "Hell, I ain't arrestin' any man for a dollar."

"Look," Gus says, his voice earnest. "I'm a poor man, Pitcher. I ain't got what you'd call worldly goods. My gun that gets food for me, my traps that keep me fed, are all up in the shack, and my dogs that carry me." Suddenly, his face changed. "I've got it!" he says. He smacked his palm down on the table. "I got it. No man can say I don't mean well, that I don't do as right as I know how."

"What?" Pitcher says.

"You can have one of my dogs," Gus says simply. "Take your pick. I drive five, and I can get along with four."

"Well, now," Pitcher began.

"I insist. I'd feel better about it. It ain't all the debt paid, but it's somethin'. I can't give you my gun, because I need it. Nor my traps, because I got to live with them. But I can give you the pick of my dogs," he says. He took Pitcher's arm, and his voice was damn near plead-

ing. "I know you only put in a dollar. But you expected to get two foxes. I can't give you the foxes, but I can give you a dog that's good and he's worth more than a dollar."

Pitcher looked at me. My mouth was hanging open. I shut it, and blinked, and I guess Pitcher thought I thought Gus was crazy generous. Anyway, he stands up, and says, "Fair enough. If you can spare him."

"That don't matter," Gus says.

They went out into the yard where all our dogs was chained to trees. I looked out the window. Gus pointed out my team, and then let the fellow look at the other dogs. I knew what was coming, just as well as I know the sun will come up tomorrow. Gus didn't have a good bunch of dogs. They was all scrubs—except for one. You guessed it. That was Blackie.

He sat there with a cocky grin on his face, his curved tail sweepin' the snow, and he even tried to lick Pitcher's face when Pitcher reached down to look at his paws. When Pitcher opened his mouth to look at his teeth, Blackie pawed at him friendly like, just like a pup.

Pitcher and Gus stood lookin' at the dog for a minute and then Gus unhooks him and hands the chain to Pitcher. They shook hands and Pitcher walks off leadin' Blackie, and Gus comes into the house.

Gus looks at me, real pleased with himself, smilin' a little.

"Well, by the Harry," I says. "That's the creepin'est thing I ever saw you do."

Gus began to laugh, then. He howled, slapping his leg and choking and rolling in the bunk and beating his sides, and pretty soon I had to laugh, too. It was funny when you come to think about it. Gus hadn't paid for his fox skins and he'd give Pitcher a dog that nobody else would take.

When Gus could talk again, he started to blow. "That's me. Quick-thinkin' Gus Tine. Yes, sir, I land on my feet."

But I notice he was willin' to get out of town early the next morning.

IN THE next three months I got so sick of hearin' about how smart Gus was that I was glad when we moved over to Swan Lake for the muskrat trapping. Gus and me had another shack over there on a big bay. Gus run a string of traps along the bay north of the shack and I run mine to the south, so for about five to six hours a day I never had to listen to him.

It was early in April that we was both hitchin' up our teams to run our line when we saw a team headin' across the lake toward our place. I figured it was the Chipewyan across the lake on the way over to bum some grub or tobacco.

It wasn't, though. As soon as the team got close enough to recognize Gus says, "That's Pitcher."

It was, all right. He drove his team off the lake and up to the shack and Gus and me go out to shake hands.

"Well, well," Gus says. "Long time no see. How are you?"

Gus was being friendly, but he had that cagey look in his face. We talked and asked Pitcher to come in while we boiled tea. Just as we was going in, Gus takes a look at Pitcher's team and says, "How's that black dog doin'?"

"He's a real good worker," Pitcher says. "Best work dog I ever owned."

"I knew it," Gus says. He sighs. "I kinda miss him."

Pitcher didn't say nothing, but went inside. After we'd boiled tea and smoked, Gus says, "I thought you was trappin' at Lac La Biche."

"I was, but it ain't a rat lake," Pitcher says, looking real steady at Gus. "I figured to trap here."

"Trap where?" Gus says. "On this bay?"

"Oh, anywheres." Pitcher says. "You show me where your line is and I'll know what's left."

"All right," Gus says, not very enthusiastic. We split up then, Pitcher goin' with Gus.

That night, when I come back from the line, Gus was quiet for a while. Then he

says, "What you figure Pitcher wants?"

"Rats," I says.

"You know where he's camped? A hundred feet past my last trap. There ain't a dry stick of wood in that muskeg for miles, and when it starts to thaw his tent will be settin' in two feet of water."

"He must be green," I says. "Anybody that would take that dog is green."

Gus laughed then, but not very hard. Also, he quit talking about how smart he was.

THREE nights later, When Gus and me sat down after supper to clean our rats, Gus was through before I got started. I says, "You must have had bad luck today."

"Only five," Gus says sourlike. "I'm goin' to move my traps."

Night after that I had twenty-seven rats. He had two. I was going to crow about it, but I takes a look at his face. He's just glaring at me.

I says, "Can I help it if you don't know how to trap rats?"

"I know how," Gus says in a hollow voice. "It ain't that."

"Maybe it's your luck," I says.

"It ain't that either," he says. He gets up and goes out into the night to his sled and comes back with a rat and throws it at my feet. All I can see is that somethin' has chewed hell out of the rat.

"A wolverine?" I says.

"Wolverine hell!" Gus explodes. "It's that damn black dog of Pitcher's. He's busted into twenty-two rat pushups these last couple of days. He just kills the rat and rips up the hide. He ain't even hungry, he's just cussed!"

It was my turn to laugh then. But Gus couldn't see nothing funny. When I could finally talk, I says, "Well, well, you always land on your feet. You're a fast thinker. You said so yourself. Think yourself out of that one."

"It ain't funny," Gus says, sore. "I'm losin' money!"

"Sure. Twenty-two rats at a half dollar a piece. That's eleven bucks—just a dollar

short of the price of two black fox." And I had to laugh some more. Gus's face just gets purple and he slams out of the shack and I still had to laugh. He was outside sulkin' long enough to get good and cold. When he come back in, he says to me, "I got to do somethin'!"

"Go tell him to chain the dog."

"The dog's been chained!" Gus shouts. "He was draggin' the chain last night. Anyhow, no chain is goin' to keep that dog if he wants to get away! Pitcher even wants him to get away!"

"All right. Go tell him you pulled a whizzer on him."

"Whizzer!" Gus yells. "I give him the dog, didn't I? I squared it, didn't I? The dog's a good worker, ain't he? You heard him say so, didn't you?"

"Sure," I says. "He just steals a little, that's all."

Gus give that rat a kick that lifted it across the room. He walks over and crawls in the blankets and turns his face to the wall and didn't talk no more that night.

BUT the next afternoon, that was the payoff. Me and Gus hit the shack at about the same time and unhitched our teams, not talkin' to each other. Then we goes into the shack. If I had ever saw a shack turned upside down and shook, that was it. Of course I didn't have to only just look at the flour scattered over the floor, the sugar sack ripped, the ban-nock et, the baking powder spilled; the salt knocked over, the cans scattered across the floor. I looked first at the fur, and so did Gus.

Well, all of Gus' fur—the closest to the hole the dog had dug under the drop log where the chips outside had kept the ground from freezin'—was yanked down from where it had hung on the rafter. Them muskrat pelts made the bottom layer of what was on the floor, and they was chewed and ripped and torn into every kind of shape except the kind that could be sold.

For once Gus couldn't say nothing. He just picked up the chewed and ruined skins

and counted them. Seventy-three skins was spoiled. Over thirty-six dollars' worth. If I'd laughed then, Gus would have shot me. Pretty soon Gus gets up and goes outside. I says, "Where you goin'?"

"To get my gun and hunt that dog and shoot him."

"You do, and Pitcher'll shoot you," I says. "You can't do that."

I talked to him until I had him cooled off a little and he promised not to go to Pitcher's camp that night. It took till midnight to convince him that the thing to do was buy the dog back from Pitcher, but finally I swung him around.

Next morning, Gus loads all the rest of the rat skins into his toboggan and we head out together for Pitcher's. I went along in case Gus lost his head.

When we come to Pitcher's tent, he was sittin' out in the sun whittlin' out rat stretchers. He must have had a hundred made, but so far as I could see he didn't have a rat caught to stretch on them. Blackie wasn't nowhere around, although Pitcher's other four dogs was chained out around the camp.

"Hello," he said. "Gettin' a lot of rats?"

I heard Gus groan under his breath, but he shook hands with Pitcher and then we talked about fur. Pretty soon, Gus, who had been tramplin' all over hisself tryin' to get to what he come for, said, "You want to sell me back that black dog, Pitcher?"

Pitcher studied awhile, his long face serious. "I don't know's I do," he said. "He ain't here now. But I kind of like that dog."

"So do I," Gus says, hearty like. "I need him, too. My dogs is all sore-footed and I—well, I got to have him. What'll you take for him?"

"I ain't sure I want to sell him," Pitcher says.

Gus says, "I'll give you six rats for him."

Pitcher just looked at him, and Gus doubled it.

"I need him," Pitcher says. "I don't reckon I'll sell him."

"I'll give you eighteen rats," Gus says. Pitcher thought a minute and says, "No, I don't reckon."

"Twenty," Gus says.

"I need him."

"Twenty-two," Gus says.

"No, I don't reckon."

"Twenty-four," Gus says in a stubborn voice. "I'll come over for him when he comes back."

Pitcher looks at him with them blue eyes of his. "Make it twenty-six and I'll sell him," he says.

Twenty-six rats. That was the price of two black fox skins at six dollars each. The other two rats was for the dollar it cost him to buy a number in the raffle. All of us sat there figuring it out, not saying anything to each other.

Then Gus gets up and goes over to the sled to get the rats and comes back and counts them out. Pitcher picks them

up and looks at them and says kind of quiet like, "Well, that's the first damn rats I've got so far." He looks at Gus. "That black dog breaks out and cleans out my pushups every night."

"Is that a fact?" Gus says sourly.

"He'll do it to yours too," Pitcher says.

"What you goin' to do with him?"

Gus looks at him a long time, then shifts to the other foot. "There's a Chipewyan across the lake I don't like," Gus says, kind of grim like. "I'm goin' to give the dog to him."

"You sure about that?" Pitcher says.

"You sure you won't keep him?"

Gus just says, "Ha!" once.

"Then it works out pretty good," Pitcher says.

"What does?" Gus says.

"About this dog," Pitcher says. He looks at Gus. "You see, I give that Indian the dog last night."

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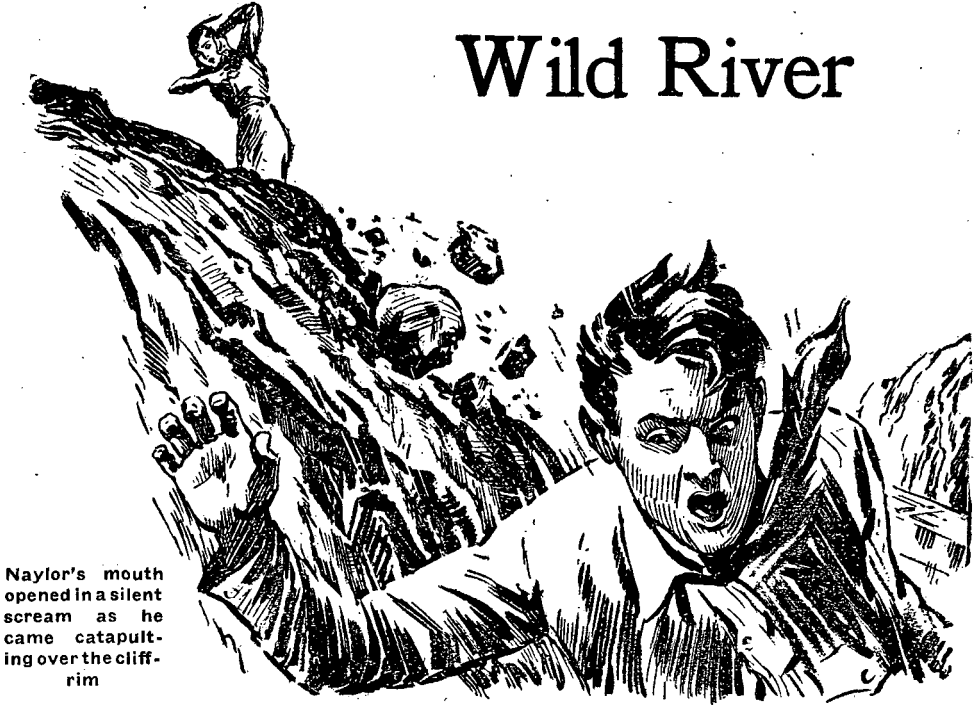
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Wild River



Naylor's mouth opened in a silent scream as he came catapulting over the cliff-rim

By JOHN STROMBERG

FRESH from college, Speed Foley (who is telling the story) goes to work on Boulder Dam, chiefly because of a boast that Buck Naylor, a self-assured graduate engineer with a well-paid job, has taunted him into making before Janet Collins.

Not for Speed, though, is the comparative grandeur of Buck's rank as assistant executive engineer. Through Janet's father's influence he gets a berth as driller's helper.

Almost immediately things begin to happen to Speed—and to his point of view. He incurs the enmity of Sam Breck, a shaggy brute of a man, whom he wrongfully accuses of stealing his wallet. Later he meets Breck again and does not recognize him; nor does he know that his fight with Breck was directly responsible for the death in childbirth of Mrs. Breck.

Danny Henderson, his boss-driller, is killed in a tunnel-slide, and only Speed knows whether Henderson's body was on the Arizona or Nevada side of the state line—a factor which will make a vast difference in the amount of compensation the Company will have to pay.

DANNY'S body is found, well over on the Nevada side. But Speed knows that the tumbling rock has moved it from the spot where Danny fell, and signs a deposition to that effect, thus quashing the rumors among the men that Speed had sold out to the company. The Big Boss likes Speed's sort of honesty, even when it costs him money, and assigns him to work as a signal-punk.

Speed discovers that not Breck but Fingers Faroni stole his wallet. He apologizes to Breck and advises him to quit drinking so heavily. "And look," he adds, fumbling for words, "about your wife—I'm sorry Breck."

Breck looks up at him with burning eyes. "You're sorry," he mumbles. Then: "Get out of here, before I kill you. . . ."

But Breck is the one who dies. The next day a cable snaps on the hoist whose hook he is riding. Speed, at the signals, frantically tries to avert disaster. But the big monster is out of control—the heavy load crashes into the canyon, carrying Breck along with it. As he flashes down past Speed's station, his teeth flash in what Speed recognizes as a gesture of reconciliation and a farewell salute.

This story began in the *Argosy* for May 20

CHAPTER XVIII

BITTER AFTERMATH

THE wind of Breck's passing brushed me, but what caught me then was more than wind. It was the awful pull of earth. I saw the steel drive into the earth two hundred feet below. A man was little at that distance—and then nothing. Little men were running toward the spot. My knees had failed, and there was no horizon for my eyes; I leaned on awful emptiness.

Hands dragged me back. The straw boss panted, "Boy, I thought you were a goner!"

I said hoarsely into the telephone, "All right, Flash. Never mind. He's down."

"Alive?" cried Morgan.

"No."

Men crowded to the edge and stood there looking down—down, down; this face of the dam was almost vertical. I struggled to a cooling-pipe and gripped it with weak hands. The pipe was steel, an inch and a half in diameter, and it was part of a vast mesh that veined this mass of concrete to the bottom, but it felt flimsy in the drag of space. Two hundred feet that yesterday was nothing, had become an awful height.

Old-timers had no fear of space; they only took care not to fall. Heights couldn't hurt you if you didn't fall. The straw boss told us cheerfully, "Well, boys, we might as well knock off. They can't send down no concrete till they get that cable fixed."

It would be fixed by tomorrow. Men swarmed casually down the forms; the next step in this giant palisade was only twenty feet below. But my knees were water and my hands were numb. I saw men climbing down the outer corner, craning and looking over, and my eyes went shut.

The straw boss said, "Made you a little dizzy, did it?"

Standing on solid concrete, not three feet below. I grinned and jumped—and fell flat on my face.

"Didn't you never see nobody killed before?"

"Not—falling. Not—that far."

But other gangs whose work depended on that cable were knocking off, and I found myself with men I didn't know. They didn't notice if I stumbled; and we crowded into a gallery, a narrow, curving hall inside the concrete, where you couldn't fall. Like ants along a tunnel. Safe. . . . We had to go up in an open skip; they didn't notice that I faced away and gripped the rail and shut my eyes in the drag of space. I had to. They would certainly notice it if I put my lunch. I stumbled as I left the skip, but I had strength enough to keep from diving headlong away from the edge.

Other men walked between me and the edge; and the road was wide, cut deep in the solid rock. You didn't have to look down. You didn't have to look up.

THEN I was safe in a closed transport, in Big Bertha, a three-decker, that could carry a hundred and fifty men. With tons of human beef around me. . . . This was what Joe Mendel meant. Protected by the mass, carried by heavy power out into the flat, into the desert where you couldn't fall. Big Bertha rumbled safely into Boulder City, where there were no heights except Snob Hill and Quality Row, and there was nothing sudden about those.

A man said sourly, "So you got your 'druthers, huh?"

This man had heard me warn Sam Breck that he was going to spatter all over the canyon. I said heavily, "You think it was my 'druthers?"

"Well, it's what you promised."

"No. I told him he'd slip off the hook some day if he kept sopping up that bootleg."

"Well, he slipped, all right!"

"And that's another lie. The load line broke, and liquor didn't have a thing to do with that. He didn't slip; he rode it to the bottom. Sam Breck was a man."

"That's a good crack from you!"

My brain was numb; I had no patience. Everybody knew that I had hated Breck, and they hadn't seen his face at the last.

I said, "Just one more crack from you will be too many."

That was foolish. You could bluff a man while you were looking at him, but you couldn't stop his thoughts. I saw men looking at me in the mess hall, and I ate, though I wasn't hungry. That was foolish too. I made it to the dormitory just in time.

I lay on my narrow cot in my narrow room and stared at the narrow ceiling; if I closed my eyes, I began to fall. But I heard men's voices stop as they passed my door. I catapulted up and paced the long way of the room—three steps and turn, three steps and turn. The walls enclosed me; I was safe.

I couldn't stand it. I clapped on my hat—my best hat, a soft, creamy panama. A little collegiate, maybe; I'd gone back to wearing decent clothes since Janet scolded me. Not the hard hat of a workman; there was nothing here to fall and break your skull.

The recreation hall was crowded in the afternoon. Breck's friends fell silent when they saw me. I said soberly, "Is this a private conversation?"

"Far as you're concerned," said Patterson, "it is."

"If I'm concerned, let's have it."

"Better go on and sell your papers."

"They're all sold. Let's have it."

Nick Faroni wasn't in the group, but he was there, and he was glad to see me behind the eight-ball. Nick Faroni snarled, "You ask for it, you get it. You tell Breck he die? He die!"

"That ought to be a lesson to you," I said absently, and kept my eyes on Patterson. Ed Patterson was fifteen years my elder, and a straw boss, though his left cheek bore a jagged scar where I'd stabbed him once with the broken end of a billiard cue. I asked Ed Patterson, "You think I jumped up seven hundred feet and cut that load line?"

"It's not quite that simple, Foley, or you'd be in jail. But everybody know that you've been getting away with murder."

"How?"

"If any other punk had got that guy, the Big Boss would have fired him in a minute. You'd have killed Breck long ago if Morgan hadn't been too good for you."

"Does Morgan say I got too gay?"

"Flash Morgan's not the kind to squeal. He does the best he can with the punks they give him—even a spoiled grandson."

"Oh," I said. "So now we're getting at it."

"You knew Breck was slow, and you had to show him up. You started trying to get his goat from the first minute. And Flash Morgan was just good enough to handle your monkey business, but the cable wasn't."

AND you couldn't tell them it had been a game—Speed Foley against Flash Morgan. This was a grimmer thing than football. Yet this hard, cold feeling was the same—the way you felt when you were up against it, out there in the field alone, the secondary down and blockers coming at you and the runner loose. You poised and waited and refused to let them suck you in.

Ed Patterson said grimly, "You admit it?"

"No. That load was nowhere near the limit."

Maybe they thought I was cocky, waiting. Nick Faroni cried, "You think you are so much!"

"That's where you're wrong. You'll never know how wrong. I'm Peter Foley's grandson, yes, but that's not much. And I'm a good signal punk, but that's not much. No man is much on a job like this. I rassled steel for Danny Henderson, and he was a better man than any of you ever thought of being, but the Colorado got him just the same. I fought Sam Breck plenty of times, and he was plenty tough. You think I hated him, but I don't know. I don't know much of anything. I only know he was a man, and the Colorado got him too."

And I almost had them, but I had to stop a minute, fighting nausea. I guess they thought it was a grin.

WILD RIVER

"That's what I mean. It doesn't matter what you think. It doesn't matter what I am. The Colorado's bigger than the lot of us."

Joe Mendel, mocking, murmured, "Splendid."

"Huh?"

"A splendid capitalistic speech."

And Mendel was my friend—my best friend; we could argue without fighting. I said slowly, "How do you mean, capitalistic?"

"Preaching abnegation to the job."

"Well, you preach abnegation to the State, and this is a Government contract. What you kicking about?"

"It's being done by private capital."

He thought it was just an argument. I blazed at him, "You think the Colorado knows the difference?"

Joe Mendel never had played football; he was thin and weak. He'd never felt the shock of a rolling block that smacked you down and didn't even throw the blocker off his stride. Or a clip from behind, dazing you so that you scrambled up and ran without knowing, murder blazing in your eyes.

"You make me sick," I said, and it was literally true. "You talk, talk, talk, but all you know is theories. You hear that men get killed, but did you ever see one killed? Oh no! That would be dangerous. You wouldn't know that men are out there doing jobs. You only argue and feel sorry for yourself."

I knew I was unfair. I saw Joe trembling, and apologized, "Oh, be yourself! I wouldn't hit a thing like you," and bolted for the dormitory and was sick.

All night I saw Sam Breck go by me in the dizzy emptiness of space. He hadn't given a damn for the Colorado; he was from Detroit. He'd only worked because he didn't know what else to do—remembering.

White dawn blazed over the desert, and the transports poured a flood of men on the canyon rim. Not insects; every one of them brought unknown years behind him, and strange things looked out of stolid

eyes. I rode in the grip of a strangeness. Men clumped down out of the transports and were lost in the returning of the graveyard shift, but every one of them bore his own secret memories, hopes and fears. We thronged on the edge of emptiness, and terror leaped on alone.

CHAPTER XIX

TO LICK THE JITTERS

THERE was no danger; Morgan's cable had been fixed, and the new load-line could support five times the weight of the men who rode it. But the platform lifted and slid out in emptiness as awful as the space between the stars. The wind of space was on my body, and my body had no weight to hold me there. I heard the carriage stop on the cable, and I braced myself for the awful swing that I knew was coming, but my fingers had no strength. . . . Down seven hundred feet. The platform grounded on the top of cooling-pipes, and men leaped down.

But it was still mid-space; I clambered with stiff knees. I gripped the top of a cooling-pipe before I turned on careful legs and croaked to the graveyard punk, "Okay, Bill, gimme. How's it going?"

Handing me the telephone, Bill said as usual, "Okay, Al," but he wasn't blind. He added gravely, "Better luck today."

"I'll need it, Bill."

"A touch of the jitters?"

"Yeah."

"Oh, you'll get over it."

"Oh, sure."

I didn't, though. The concrete buckets came out of dizzy space, and no man rode them, but a new man presently must ride that hook. Not Breck . . . I forced myself to look at the brink where Breck had passed me, and my eyes refused to focus and my timing failed. I signaled the stops too hastily, and Morgan had to make two or three attempts to land a bucket. Morgan protested through the telephone, "Hey, kid, wake up and come to the party!"

111
 the signals
 the floor
 and
 edge
 me

"All right in a minute," he said. "The signals are all right. Buckets hit and concrete. Spattered concrete. Hey, Foley, what's the blank?"

"Imagine what they said when it and burst. I had to say. 'No. I'll just take 'em slow till you another punk.'"

"Take 'em as they come," said and, "and to hell with you."

"Flash. My timing's gone. I bust bucket. If a man was on that hook, kill him sure."

"Flash Morgan, who had never killed a man till yesterday, demanded, 'Have you let those blab-mouthed hunkies get your goat?'"

He hadn't seen Breck's finish. But he saw the wreck come up, and sighed, "Maybe you'd better take a layoff, kid. The Boss will sure raise hell about that bucket."

And I had to let the relief punk down—an eighteen-year-old kid who knew no better than to grin and say, "I hear you lost your grip."

"You're here alive," I said, and wiped my face with a trembling hand. "I hope you never know your luck."

And I had to ride up—with both feet in the hook and both hands clutching the cable. I could hardly stand when I stepped off on solid ground. There was a roaring in my ears.

BUT that was real. That was the Hi-Mix Plant—the biggest concrete-plant in the world, shaking the cliff with shuddering thunder. Row on row of giant mixers bellowing, revolving slowly, tilting their giant barrels like the guns of a giant battle waged by pygmies. Men were insignificant and few; those monsters were almost automatic, measuring and blending sand from Nevada, gravel from Arizona, man-made dust from Oregon and water from Colorado—binding again into timeless rock the gravel ground and left

in deserted channels by that wild river in ages gone. Before Black Canyon was.

No insect ever thought of a thing like that. A swarm of insects might have marvelous skill, but the skill was instinct, specialized and single. Insects had no wonder of what they did.

Yonder, across the canyon, tiny men were grooming the savage cliffs. Not spiders. Men, born to feel solid ground under their feet.

This vast confusion was not confusion, and an idle man was something to catch the eye. The Big Boss of the Company came by. He'd heard about the ruined bucket; he said coldly, "So you thought you'd quit before I fired you?"

"No. Before I killed somebody. But I haven't quit."

"That's what you think."

"I want a job as a high-scaler."

"Huh?"

"When an airplane pilot crashes, he goes up again. Without a passenger. I've crashed. I know it."

"And you think this is a sanitarium?"

"You need high-scalers. And you know I can do the work. I learned about rock from Danny, and the jackhammer's not so different from an air-drill. If I fall, I can't kill anybody but myself."

The big man glanced away across the canyon. He took out a penknife and began to sharpen a pencil that was sharp already, as a man might do when he was bored. He looked at me before he spoke; and the Hi-Mix plant was bellowing, and flatcars clanked and clattered, bearing concrete buckets, and great trucks roared by, but he didn't raise his voice. He knew I could read lips.

"I hear the men are blaming you."

"That so?"

"Don't be a fool. We know what made that cable break; a sheave on the return line broke and cut it. Even if rough handling did it, that would be Flash Morgan's fault, not yours. I know you didn't jump up seven hundred feet and bite it."

"Sir?" I said. "Who told you that?"

"Who told me what?"

"What the men are saying."

"Is that any of your business?"

"When somebody comes and tells you what I said? The very words. You just now used 'em."

"Are they copyrighted?"

"You know what I mean. You claim you don't like spies yourself—or the men that hire 'em."

"Do I gather that you disapprove of me?"

"You asked me once who pumped me about Danny and then spilled it to a shyster. You were pretty sore about it, too, if I remember."

"And if I remember, you refused to tell me."

"I'm no squealer. And I've got no use for squealers."

"Well," said the big man, twinkling, "this one seems to think he's a friend of yours—Joe Mendel."

"Sir?" I cried. "You knew it all the time?"

"Well, not exactly," said the big man, grinning. "We suspected it."

"Oh, gosh, I'm dumb!"

"Well, that's no news."

"I mean—I thought you meant— You mean, he was the one that told you about me?"

"What are you going to do about it? Beat him up?"

"Of course not. If he told you what I said, he thought he was doing me a favor."

"That was the general idea. So he's a real two-handed squealer—squealing for both sides?"

"Don't fire him, sir! He said he'd stop it. If I hadn't been so dumb—"

"Oh, keep your shirt on. If I fired the nuts and cranks around this job, I'd have to finish it all by myself. And I'd begin with you."

"But why?"

"Because you can't make up your mind. You simply disagree with everybody. When you're with the men, you act like a dyed-in-the-wool Bourbon."

I said glumly, "Scotch or rye. Or ice cream soda."

"Don't get funny, kid. I'm serious."

"A GOLDFISH isn't funny to a goldfish. I was talking to Breck's friends. I got excited. I suppose Joe told you that I made a sort of speech. Capitalistic—so he thought."

"You're Peter Foley's grandson?"

"Oh," I said, "Joe told you that, too, did he?"

"I suppose you know your grandpa's pretty hostile to the Project?"

"Well, he lives in Arizona."

"And he swings a lot of weight. If you could pacify him—"

I said grimly, "You don't know Pete Foley."

"Don't I?" said the big man, twinkling.

"He's a real old-timer. A desert rat. He knew this country before railroads. In the gold camps. But he never found much gold. He rambled up and down the Rockies all the way from Oregon to Mexico, and never had much luck of any kind until he started getting old. He took this homestead in the desert. And he made it stick. Plenty of nesters tried it, but they couldn't take it. So he bought their land. Oh, sure, he bought it cheap. It wasn't worth much. Desert. But it suited him. Oh, sure, he's got the name for being hard. No soft guy ever licked the desert, and he's done it."

"What I mean, he knows this country and he likes it the way it is. Not curried and irrigated and all settled up with nesters that sit down and cry when things go wrong. Not paved and easy; he wants room around him. When the politicians try to argue with him, he just throws 'em off the ranch."

"He wouldn't throw you off."

"Oh, no. He'd only clout me with a stick of stovewood. And I wouldn't blame him. Even in my time, I've seen things getting thick, and I know how he feels."

The big man snapped the penknife shut and sighed, "Forget it, kid. I only thought a few days' rest would fix you up."

"Oh, no, it wouldn't! If I turn my back, this thing will have me licked forever."

"And you want to try high-scaling?"

"Yes, sir."

"It's a sinful waste of talent. You were born to be a signal punk."

"I'd hate to think it!"

"Oh, all right. Report to Kinsey in the morning—and I hope you fall and break your neck."

I grinned and sighed, "It might not be a bad idea." This big man carried an awful burden, the responsibility for many lies; he knew the use of flippancy. Things couldn't crush you if you grinned and let them slip a little.

Mendel had no humor, and the world bore heavily on his thin shoulders. When he heard about my change of jobs, he said severely, "That's pure masochism. That's neurotic."

Mendel knew a lot of six-bit words. I grinned and said, "It sounds important, anyway."

And Janet's father was all right again, and Janet wrote, "You'll never know how much you helped me, kidding me."

CHAPTER XX

THE FALL OF A HERO

HIGH-SCALERS kidded everything. They hung on the rock like spiders, but they didn't feel like spiders—looking down on men who crawled like ants. They curried the savage cliffs and made them safe. They hung in slings or in iron buckets or on narrow scaffolds over the teeming canyon, and all things looked small to them.

Kinsey, the straw boss, snorted, "So you worked in the tunnels, and you had a whirl at being a signal punk, and now you think you can tackle a man's job, huh?"

"That's it," I said with chattering teeth. "B-beginning at the bottom and working up. J-just for the experience."

"The way you look, you won't live long enough to get it."

"I'm all right."

"Like hell you are. You better call it a day and go on home." But the bucket where I was to stand that day hung only thirty feet below the top; I thought I could make it. Kinsey shouted, "Hey! I'll let you down in a sling."

"L-like hell you will. I'll d-do it like the big boys do."

"Oh, well," sighed Kinsey, "if you fall, kid, it won't hurt you—long."

The steel rope slanted down over a bulge in the cliff. The drag of space was behind me and above me and below me, but I kept my eyes glued on the rock and slid down on my stomach. Queerly, the last ten feet was easier because it took more strength. My weight was more than normal, or my strength was less, but I could cope with simple gravity. The drag was all in one direction now.

My legs collided with the yoke of the iron bucket, and I saw Black Canyon swimming below me, and the fear swirled back and almost drowned me. But my legs slid into the bucket, and the strong iron rose above my waist. I heard a derisive cheer; my neighbors had been watching my timid efforts.

But they hadn't kidded me till I was safe. I risked one hand to doff my helmet—trying to play up.

"I thank you. I thank you. Don't give up, men; you can learn to do it if—"

The bucket wobbled; I dropped the helmet and grabbed wildly for the rope. A roar of laughter swept along the cliff. That was the cardinal sin of a high-scaler—dropping things.

But the helmet fell inside the bucket; I retrieved it and went shakily to work. My task that day was drilling holes to blast away a bit of the cliff that presently might fall. A jackhammer was a good deal like an air-drill—smaller, of course, and lighter than it looked; you held it in your hands. The hard thing was the way you swung away from the cliff if you pressed against it.

The sun leaped up and the heat engulfed me—double heat; it blazed on my

naked back and was reflected in my face. But it helped me forget the fear. Black Canyon dwindled to the blazing bit before my face. I was pretty limp when the shift was over, and the others laughed.

"You better hunt a beauty parlor, boy. You're all flushed up."

Their own skins ranged from deep mahogany to coffee black; my skin blazed red. But I was used to heat, and it didn't blister, and they presently forgot that I was green.

THEY didn't know I was more than normally afraid. They thought I was merely clumsy. But I'd been a four-sport man, and I soon learned their trick of dancing on the cliff—hanging in a sling and kicking from place to place to reach loose rock. I only had to keep my eyes on the rock and forget to listen when it went crashing down—down, down, more and more faintly till it died in emptiness.

They taught me to manage a duralumin bar, one-handed, reaching to pry loose rock. High-scalers worked with special tools, lighter than steel and more expensive; if you dropped one, it was ruined, and you sure got kidded—not because it was expensive, but because you were a fumble-fingered mug and cast discredit on the craft.

Off shift, among ordinary men, they swaggered a little; and they kidded everything—maybe because of pride, or maybe because there was no humor in their job.

They had a bet. Nobody worked below high-scalers, but trucks had to pass on the tilted roads in the face of the cliff. I knew those trucks; I'd dodged them often enough. Those juggernauts paid small attention to such things as men. Tremendous, powerful, with sixteen speeds forward and backward, thundering up and down the steep and narrow roads—backward or forward, it made little difference to them. Their drivers absorbed a sense of power from those mighty engines. If you didn't jump when you heard one coming, it was just too bad.

High-scalers had a bet. Who first would

kill one of those so-and-so truck-twisters?

At the wheel, of course. Truck-twisters on their feet were inoffensive; if you killed one then, it didn't count.

I put my money up. Oh, not at first; the others wouldn't let me. They insisted that a green guy had too much advantage—dropping things.

Just kidding, but the money actually was up. Buck Naylor held the stakes. It had to be a neutral—not a scaler, not a twister, not a stiff at all. An engineer; and Buck was popular enough with stiffs who hadn't gone to school with him. They didn't know his humor was condescension.

Buck threw back his handsome head and laughed. "Harder and harder all the time, huh, Speedy?"

I said mildly, "I'm no lily-fingered engineer. You can't expect me to get prettier and prettier."

"Couldn't you kill 'em fast enough with a cable?"

"All I want from you," I said, "is a receipt."

Buck didn't do much field work now. But one day, hanging in a sling on the Nevada side, not far below the top, I saw him craning over. Not in working clothes. In crisp white riding breeches and polished boots—on a job where nothing could stay clean or polished. Even more unusual was Naylor's manner. It was positively friendly.

"Hi, there, Speedy! Guess who's here."

I grunted, "All I see is a pair of beautiful white pants with nothing in 'em."

Then a clear voice drifted down over the cliff, and my heart stopped beating. Janet! Janet was up there!

"How are you, Al? I'm sorry I can't see you."

"Don't you try! Get back there! . . . Naylor, you fool, don't let her!"

THE fear swirled on me, and I felt Black Canyon sucking, dragging. She was clutching Naylor's arm and peering over. "Al! I never would have known you. Is that really you?"

"In person," I admitted.

I knew where she was standing—how the loose rock slanted up behind that ledge, how any bit of rock might roll under her feet and shoot her over. Naylor could never hold her if she slipped; he was too near the edge—insolently near because he knew I was afraid. Her clear gray eyes were sweet, and her mouth was smiling, and her slim hand wafted me a kiss.

On either side of me, I heard rock drifting down, striking the cliff at longer and longer intervals, more and more faintly till it . . . died.

"Please, Janet. Please get back. Please don't go reckless on me, honey."

"You're not freckled any more!"

"Please, Naylor. Get her back."

Naylor explained indulgently, "He wants you to appreciate the danger of his job. Don't worry, sweet; this ledge is solid."

"Yeah, but if she slips—"

"Don't worry," said Buck Naylor soothingly. "I've been around this gully longer than you have, and I'm not in the habit of breaking ladies' necks. In fact," he added with light emphasis, "I've never broken anybody's neck."

And I couldn't be calm. I said, "You heard me, Naylor. Get that woman back, or I'll sure break yours."

"Tut, tut," said Naylor. "That's what comes of eating meat."

But Janet had already vanished, and her cool voice drifted down: "I'm sorry we disturbed your work. I thought I couldn't wait to see you. I was wrong."

"Go with her, Buck! Don't let her step on—anything loose!"

"Control yourself," said Naylor, smiling. "I'll go with her, never fear. Bye-bye, my tough young—Aaaah!"

That was a hoarse, inhuman scream—not like a man's voice, not like any sound I could remember. Danny had only sworn as the dark crashed down. Sam Breck had seen death coming and had made no sound at all. A few small stones sprayed out over the ledge where Naylor had turned back; and behind them, kicking, came Buck Naylor's legs.

BELIEVE it or not, a man can remember things in a flash like that. The little stones arched out beyond me, and my legs jerked short against the cliff, and my eyes flicked downward, inward, under the overhang where men were working, and my throat split in a high-pitched yell as the stones went by me. Naylor's hands had clawed and slowed him.

He came over on his back, feet first, and turned in a slow forward somersault; I saw his dark, contorted face, not handsome now—the mouth wide open and the eyes wide open, stretched, the whites exposed. I saw his grappling hands.

He would try to grab me. But no human strength could catch and stop that falling weight—I knew without knowing; and my legs had straightened against the cliff, kicking away outside the arc of his fall. The rush of the returning swing met his body squarely, and with all my strength I kicked him inward, toward the scaffold under the overhang.

The impact spun me against the cliff, but I didn't know it. My eyes jerked upward and saw no other body falling; downward, and saw empty space. I heard Buck's body crash on the wooden platform. Something within me shouted against Black Canyon, "Not this time!"

Oh, not aloud; something had hit me in the back. But men dragged Naylor to safety, and my breath came, and I called to Janet, "He's all right. They caught him. Can you hear me, honey? He's all right!"

Where was she? Had she passed me in that blind, suspended moment? No; a thousand feet of space was clean. Had there been time for her to reach the bottom? No. A tiny truck was crawling placidly down yonder, and it didn't stop.

The fear was gone. I bawled over the vastness of Black Canyon, "Janet! Answer me!"

"I—can't!" said Janet, weeping.

"Stay right there! Wherever you are, don't try to move! I'm coming!"

Climbing the rope with practiced hands, clawing the cliff with hobnailed feet. The

girl was on the loose rock slope behind the ledge—face down, her arms spread out and her slim legs spread as if she would clutch the earth. She shivered when I lifted her. She clutched me, shivering.

"I—tried to catch him! Al, I tried!"

"You would," I scolded her. "But don't you know there's a law against it?"

Kidding her—the way you had to when no sane and human words would fit. She faltered, "What?"

"Amateurs butting in on professionals. Didn't you know your Uncle Al was on the job? We put on quite an act; it couldn't have come off any better if we'd practiced a week."

Her knees had stiffened; she could stand. I helped her up the loose rock slope—oh, carefully! The fear was gone, but this slim girl was not a pawn in the battle. We met Kinsey running.

Kinsey panted, "Who?"

"Naylor. But he's all right. They caught him. On the scaffold."

"Wha'd'ye mean? You crazy?"

Kinsey knew no falling man would hit that scaffold, in there under the overhang. He knew no man could fall that far and be all right. I tried to draw the girl away, but she resisted, crying, "No! He may be hurt!"

"Oh, sure; bunged up a little, anyway. But they'll take care of him."

"I can't go off and leave him!"

"Sure you can. You'll have to, honey. This is out of bounds for women."

"Hey!" bawled Kinsey. "Where do you think you're goin'?"

"Don't you see I'm with a lady?"

"What the—what's she doin' here? Who brought her?"

"Naylor. But somebody's got to take her home."

"Don't bother," said the girl in a dead, cold voice. "We came in a staff car; I know where it is. I'll just wait there for him."

"He won't be ridin' in a staff car, honey. Not today. An ambulance is more his size."

"I'll wait and see."

"No, honey. They won't let you near the ambulance. Where is this car? I'll drive you."

"I can drive myself."

She wasn't fit to drive those roads in the savage rock. I snorted, "Yeah, and have some ranger ask you what you're doin' with a staff car? You'll get Buck in trouble."

SHE submitted then. But cold reaction had her; in the car she closed her eyes and did not speak. I tried to take her mind off it, chatting about Boulder, Colorado, but she didn't answer.

Seven silent miles. In Boulder City, Nevada, I had to ask again, "Where are you staying?"

The same house on Snob Hill. I took her there, but couldn't take her in—a dirty, hobnailed and half-naked stiff. I asked her, "Is your father here?"

"Oh, yes, he's here."

"How is he?"

"What?" said Janet faintly. "Oh, he's fine."

"You gallop in and see if they can rustle you a drink. I'll let you know how Naylor is when they bring him in."

"Don't bother," said the white-faced girl. "My father isn't a woman; they'll tell him."

She was pretty shaky. I said, "Sure," and let it go at that.

Why was she angry? She was not a fool; she knew that women had no place on a job like this. Except, of course, as women. Not her sort—except, of course, the women of Snob Hill and Quality Row, where men might live a little graciously.

I wasn't an engineer, would never be an engineer; I knew it now. But she had always known I was a stiff. Even today, when she first saw me, she had glowed with gladness.

Pacing and turning in my narrow room, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror—not a good one, but too good. I wasn't freckled any more; my skin was muddy red all over. Not all over. Only to the waist and to the eyes. Like a piebald

animal. Hard-flanked and empty-eyed. With room for only one thought in my stupid brain. The Colorado. Janet had never been a thought. Only a feeling.

Janet was right here in Boulder City, yet the distance now was more than it had ever been. Across a year and a half and a thousand miles, her letters had created nearness; and a minute had destroyed it. How?

My clothes were good enough, but they brought nothing to my sun-bleached eyes. They didn't hide the look of muscle. I went out, and everybody knew about the accident by now. If Naylor had been killed, they would have taken it quite calmly, but an acrobatic feat was news.

Even at the infirmary. A doctor told me, "I don't understand it. Such a fall should cause internal injuries, but there's no sign of any yet. He must have been unconscious when he struck."

"How do you mean?"

"A conscious man invariably stiffens in the effort to save himself. He must have fallen limply, like a drunk man or a child."

"That's luck. It must have knocked him out when I kicked him in the stomach."

"Oh, you're Foley? That was a marvelous thing you did. Fast thinking."

I said heavily, "If I'd had time to think, I'd have missed him sure."

I telephoned to Janet, and I tried to be cheerful, but her voice was bright and cold. I said, "He's got a broken leg, and it's pretty bad, I guess, but they say he's lucky it wasn't worse."

"Of course he is," said Janet. "I've heard all about it. From the neighbors. Isn't that the berries? I was there, but all I did was fall down on my face and cry. I hadn't the faintest notion what you'd done."

"You had a right to cry."

"You saved his life."

"Oh, that," I said. "He had my money in his pocket."

"Money?"

Floundering, I told her about the bet. She didn't know high-scalers and she saw

no humor in it. I said heavily, "Oh, skip it, honey. I'm just kidding."

Janet flared, "Don't call me honey!"

"Why?"

"I'm not from Georgia. I'm from Colorado."

"But you never said you minded."

"Do I have to tell you everything?"

Blind panic seized me, and I said, "I guess you'd better, Jan. But not this way. Not over the telephone. I'm coming up."

"Oh, no, you're not!"

"Name three good reasons."

"One's enough. I'm lying down."

"Get up. I'll give you fifteen minutes."

Janet cried, "So good of you!"

"I never claimed to be good. But I'm no stepchild, and I love you, and you know it, and you've always known it, and you never seemed to mind—until today."

The girl said weakly, "Well, not always."

"Fifteen minutes."

"Twenty."

It was only a couple of minutes' walk from the sand-flats. Eighteen minutes could be very long when everybody wanted to talk about it—what you'd done and how you'd done it. When you didn't know. You couldn't tell them that a single instant could be three years building up—that one split second could explode the pressure that Black Canyon had been piling up on you so long. You couldn't say it was because you cared so much. They knew you didn't like Buck Naylor.

CHAPTER XXI

KINGPIN FOLEY

OUT of the sand-flats into a neighborhood of sweet, green, tilted lawns. And Janet's hostess met me at the door, and she'd forgotten that I'd ever been there, but she told me warmly, "I'm so glad to know you. We're so fond of Carlton Naylor, and so grateful to you, and so thrilled at what you did. They say it was one chance in a million."

"Yes'm. It just happened to come off."

"Are you depressed about it? Or is this

the way you act when modesty breaks out on you?"

I had to play up. I had to grin and say, "Depressed. You see, the guy's my rival."

"Oh!" said the lady, beaming.

Through an open window, out through a cool veranda, over the tilted lawns and the roofs of the lower houses, you could see the sand-flats and the bare white dormitories and the mess hall and the sprawling recreation hall, where men lived in the mass.

And I remembered when these lawns were new, raw dirt hauled in from the distant bottoms where a little soil was dropped and left by the desert floods, not all washed into the Colorado to be wasted into the sea. Where water could bring beauty even now—where every rain brought brief and valiant flowers.

Even in the desert, graciousness could flower with a little beauty and a little ease of mind. When Janet came, her hostess tactfully excused herself.

But Janet's face was pale; her eyes were listless and her voice was bright. She said, "Well, how does it feel to be a hero?"

"Skip it, Jan."

"Please don't let's quarrel, Al. Please let's be friends."

"That's a good offer," I said grimly, "after all these years. Come clean, wild woman. Why am I in the doghouse?"

"Doghouse?" said the girl, wide-eyed and too polite.

"I know I didn't act like a Romeo when I looked up and saw you. But that cliff's no balcony. I've seen men killed. I've never seen a woman killed, and when I do, I don't want you to be the first one. Is there anything unreasonable about that?"

"Of course not," said the girl unhappily. "Then what?"

She faltered, "I can't tell you if you glare that way."

I catapulted to my feet and strode away from her—three paces; and the violence went out of me, and I turned back. Still thinking with my legs. . . . I took her hands out of her lap and stood there looking down at her, but I could feel the dis-

tance yet. I fell down on my knees and laid my cheek to hers and begged, "Oh, kid, what is it?"

"Al, you've got to get away from here. You don't know what it's doing to you."

BUT I did. The desert had burned out the gaiety we used to share. I could be flippant, but not gay. I said, "It hasn't killed me yet."

She whispered, "I'm afraid it has."

Her cheek was cold; I realized that I was kneeling, and got up. Her hands were listless, and I let them go. I said, "I kept my promise. I put in for the Civil Service. But the merit system is suspended."

"You don't have to stay here."

"No. I might get into a C.C.C. camp if some politician felt like giving me a recommendation."

"Have you ever tried to get a job away from here—in engineering?"

"No."

"Why not?"

I tried to tell her. I said savagely, "I started something and I'll finish it."

"But what?" said Janet. "Boulder Dam? You didn't start it, and you know they can finish it without you."

"Sure. I'm not important. No man is; not here. But I'm important to myself. Old Danny was important to himself, and so was Breck. You never heard of Breck. You never will. He's dead. And Buck's important to himself, and he'd be dead this minute if I hadn't been there."

"If you hadn't been there," said the listless girl, "we wouldn't have been looking for you, and he never would have fallen."

But I didn't know the answer to a thing like that—the interweaving of men's lives, the intricate complexities of chance. I couldn't prove that I owed anything to Danny Henderson, to Breck, to all the men whose lives went into the making of a thing like this. And men whose lands the Colorado washed into the sea, and men who had been fighting it four hundred years. I said, "I'll stick it out."

"Because you're stubborn!"

"Call it that."

"Because it's hard. Because you've got to prove that you can take it. Well, you've proved it, and I hope you're satisfied. You're tough and cocky and insensitive. You know what happens to a fighter when he proves that he can take it."

"Yeah," I said, and felt the corners of my mouth pull tight. "Punch-drunk. Slug-nutty."

"Al, how long have we been out of school?"

"Three years."

The girl was silent, looking up at me.

"I know," I said. "You needn't say it. Three years out of school and still a common laborer."

She whispered, "That's not it."

"Well, tell me, then."

"You're satisfied to be one. Even proud."

"You may be right," I said. "Somebody's got to do the labor; we can't all be engineers. And what it's done to me is nothing. Plenty of men are dead."

She sat there looking up at me as if I were a stranger, and the irises of her gray eyes were fringed with black. She rose.

"Goodbye, Al, and good luck."

I cried, "Oh, Jan," and tried to take her in my arms, not roughly; but she looked at me and shook her head and turned and left the room.

PUNCH-DRUNK. Slug-nutty. I went down the Hill, and was aware of men who moved about me, not like insects. Every one of them the center of his own unmanageable universe. To each of them, all other men were figures in his own hot dream.

Joe Mendel tried to compliment me on my acrobatics, but I didn't hear him at the moment. I said grimly, "How would you like to take a little trip into Arizona?"

"Where?" said Joe, but I was expecting him to ask why, and I answered that:

"It'll do you good."

At the office of the Company, they said the Big Boss had gone home. I went back up Snob Hill and out along Quality Row

to the great man's house. I'd never been there, and they didn't know I was just a stiff. The big man came, chewing a toothpick, asked with lifted brows, "Now what's afire?"

"You offered me a lay-off once. I'd like it now."

"But you don't need it now. You've got the jitters licked—so Kinsey tells me. No man with the jitters could have done what you did today. Nice going, kid; you came at me so quick I forgot to tell you."

"Thanks. That's why I can afford to take it now. And I do need it."

"Take it," snapped the big man. "Make it permanent. I'm tired of bothering about you."

"Bothering? Three years I've been here, and I've bothered you just twice. The only rest I've had was in the hospital, and the only change I've asked for was to keep from killing somebody. Now I want a chance to attend to a little business of my own, and you get sore about it."

"There you go," said the big man fretfully. "Three years I've watched you, and I still believe that you've got something on the ball, but damned if I can find out what it is—outside of a gift for kicking shins. How long do you want to be gone?"

Lost in my own hot universe, I said, "Three days."

"Is that all! Hell, tear out. Nobody'll miss you."

"Can I take Joe Mendel with me?"

"Mendel?"

"And a hand-level."

"What's the idea?"

"You wanted me to pacify Pete Foley. Mendel to rile him up, and a hand-level to calm him down."

"Well, it sounds nutty enough to make sense—your kind of sense. When do you want to go?"

"Right now. Tonight."

The big man snorted, "And you stand there wasting time!"

I had to waste time convincing Joe that I wasn't kidding. Joe said dazedly, "Vacation?"

"Yeah. You've talked a lot about Pete

Foley; now you're going to see him—hoofs and horns and tail."

"But why?"

"For the good of your soul. And his. And mine," I said, "I hope. God knows I need a laugh right now."

CHAPTER XXII

CABALLERO MENDEL

JOE MENDEL was an earnest man; he lived by his intelligence, with caution, and no wild compulsion ever rose within him like a tide and drove him. He was dazed. I hustled him aboard a bus to Las Vegas, and the sun was down, but it was Saturday; Las Vegas was wide open. Not just gambling joints. I hustled him into a dealer's office and planked down the money for an automobile—just a demonstrator, to be sure, but cash. I could afford it. Either I'd have more money or I'd have no use for the little that I had.

Joe Mendel, Ph.D., had often talked about the nature of reality—how human senses could respond only to outward seeming, how the thing itself eternally escaped; but I had never understood it until now.

We crossed the ferry below Black Canyon and surged up into the desert and went rocketing across the desert, under the hot red stars, past hills as grim, as lifeless, as fantastic as the mountains of the moon. My mind refused to accept reality—would not believe what I had seen in Janet's eyes.

This road was never built for speed. Some day, when the dam was finished, a four-lane highway would come sweeping along its top, linking Nevada and Arizona, loosing the tide of men and millions across the desert; but this land was lonely yet. The headlights danced and swung, rushing before us into the purple dark. Joe Mendel, rocking and bouncing, shouted over the roar of gravel, "What do you want me to do?"

I answered grimly, "Be yourself, that's all."

And in the desert, once you were on a road, there was seldom a choice to confuse

you. Once we turned and followed a pavement, a few minutes, a few miles. The headlights flashed on a signboard: "Open Range. Look Out For Cattle." Not Pete Foley's cattle, though. Pete Foley was a free man yet; his ranch was far from a pavement. We turned off, and the road got rougher, and the desert broke into long swells of sage brush and scrub pine, and the wind-worn, lonely hills were headlands over a purple sea.

We came at midnight to a barbed-wire gate. This was the back door of the ranch; but there were miles to go. Joe marveled, "And does all this land belong to your grandfather?"

"Yeah," I grunted, "and much good it does him. Desert."

Trees and houses showed on the dim horizon. Dogs began to bark. A man ran out of a white-plastered adobe cabin, a short, swarthy man in baggy underclothes, gripping a shotgun, crouching and glaring at the headlights. Mendel was alarmed.

I shouted, "Hi, Rodrigo! Shoot and be done with it!"

"Who iss it? What you want?"

"Something to eat!" I bellowed.

And Rodrigo broke into a grin and dropped the shotgun and flung out dramatic arms and shouted, "*Jefecito! . . . Oye, María, despierta, que acá viene Don Alfredo!*"

And Maria trotted out, a dumpy, pock-marked woman in a nightgown, barefoot, modestly clutching a shawl around her. Behind her straggled so many children that Joe Mendel must have thought of a movie trick. She dropped the shawl to embrace me, but the nightgown was voluminous, and she had boxed my ears many a time. Grinning and patting her, I told Joe Mendel, "This is Maria. Watch your step or she'll bat your ears down."

"*Caballero*, do not believe him! He is *muy mentiroso!*"

Very much a liar. Others collected out of the gloom of poplars, laughing and chattering in two broken languages, and Mendel was confused. Not Mexicans; they called themselves American—Spanish-

American, if you insisted, though their blood was very little Spanish. It was Indian. Mendel, grandson of a serf, was an American, but these brown folk had always been here. They were serfs, and they called me master, but they didn't hesitate to call me a liar too.

NOT master; not exactly. *Jefecito*—the diminutive. When Peter Foley came, the word they muttered was a sterner word, and the clamor fell.

"*Cállense. El amo!*"

Quiet. The master!

Old Pete Foley gangled into the glare of headlights. Tall and thin, his blue-jeans pants pulled on over his night-shirt and not too well buttoned, rumpled on hasty boots. His gaunt, gray-stubbled face was gentle and his voice was thin.

"Is that you, Al?"

"Yes, Grandpa. You all right?"

"I would be," said the old man, querulous, "if I could get a good night's sleep. Why do you always bust in here at such ungodly times?"

"I haven't done it for four years."

"Well, it don't seem that long. I reckon it is, though. Where the hell you been?"

"At Boulder Dam. I wrote you, sir."

"I know, I know. I got the letter. I—Did you say Boulder Dam?"

"Yes, Grandpa."

"I remember," said the old man grimly. "Hoover Dam. You thought you'd teach your grandpa how to pad ashes?"

"No, sir."

"Well, how come you, then?"

"Let's leave it till tomorrow, Grandpa. This is my friend Joe Mendel."

"Howdy, Joe?" said the formidable, ruthless Peter Foley, scraping an awkward boot.

I woke to things remembered but not real. No feet were tramping past my door, no voices growled with morning discontent, no transports rumbled in the street. There was no street. Only the open range, and quiet men on horseback riding out, and the long swells of land that flowed away and melted into purple like the sea.

Fantastic shapes were sailing there. Not hills; they had no slopes. Those were enchanted mesas. This was not a dormitory room, ten feet by seven. It was wide and cool, rough-raftered, and no clock was in it.

This was not a hive of men; the voices that you heard were few, and they were women's voices, cheerful and unhurried. This was not a city, driven and compelled by clocks. The windmills turned in the slow breeze of morning, and tall poplars threw long coolness across the land, and the brown children stared to see a stranger here. They called Joe Mendel *caballero*, gentleman.

I asked him in the long, low-raftered dining room, "How are you on a horse?"

"I've never tried," said Mendel humbly.

So I got him a gentle one. But tall—it seemed to him. He was excited, telling me how "horseman" was a word of dignity in many languages.

Vacation! He was thirty-six years old and he had never had one.

We rode northward from the houses, and the land was bare; there were no trees but Joshua trees, clumsy and stiff, able to live without water. Yet the ranch was not all desert.

From a horseman's height on the dry swells of ground, you saw a wide and shallow valley of scrub pines, and windmills here, and tiny cattle grazing. Even here, the scars of water sprawled across the land—red gullies cut through sand and gravel to red clay, spread out like fingers, deepening toward a central gorge. We rode beyond the ends of the gullies; and I had Joe ride ahead, and then galloped past and squinted back through the hand-level, sighting on Joe's head or the horse's hoofs.

Joe Mendel, taller, stronger, swifter than a man afoot, served as a measure for the levels of the land.

The horse had little interest in it, though. The horse liked company; he wanted to follow my horse, and he learned that Joe was green. Joe tried to hold him, and the horse got up on his hind legs and waltzed with indignation.

Terrifying to Joe Mendel. I exhorted,

"Ride him, Joe! Don't let him think you're just a passenger!"

BUT Joe had never argued with a horse. Joe Mendel, Ph.D., grew conscious of his feeble body, and the horse's mind was stronger than his own. The sun swung high, grew hot, and the saddle burned. I had to abandon the attempt to use him as a measure, and it doubled the distance that we had to ride. He clung in helpless misery. There was no water, and the poplars were a lonely clump of weeds on the hot horizon.

It was long past noon when we got back to the houses. I swung down, but Mendel's horse smelled water and went trotting off with his unhappy passenger. Joe tried to hold him, and the horse promptly went into his dance.

And a strange thing happened. Pain and fury must have wiped out fear. Joe Mendel, saddle-burned and weary, saw the horse's ears against the sky, and knew they had no right to be there, and he snatched his hat off and he slapped that horse's ears down.

"Ride him, cowboy!"

The astonished beast went into the air

and came down on four legs and was a gentle quadruped again, turning a grievous, reproachful eye to watch his rider clamber down.

He stood there, breathing heavily.

"Why, Joe, you lost your temper!"

Mendel said with dignity, "You didn't tell me he would buck."

"Would what?" I said, but added tactfully, "Oh, sure, Joe. Any range horse will until he knows who's boss."

Joe hardly felt his blisters, limping in to lunch.

Pete Foley wasn't there. He hadn't been at breakfast. Mendel asked me, "Doesn't he ever eat?"

"Not much. He's pretty old—nearly a hundred."

"Pretty feeble, is he?"

"Feeble! Ride with him one day and you'll find out."

But Joe had done his riding for one day. He limped among the adobe cabins, in the shade of poplars, and brown children followed him. They called him *caballero*, horseman.

Old Pete Foley came at sundown. Gangling off his horse, he stared and said, "Hello! Do I know you?"

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

Gone with the Vaccine

THERE seems to be a possibility that the common head-cold will become extinct. Doctor Victor Heiser supplies this cheering news; he reports that research scientists may soon perfect certain vaccines which will insure the world against colds and influenza. In fact, within two years, Doctor Heiser believes.

As consultant for the National Association of Manufacturers, Doctor Heiser has been studying industrial accidents and illnesses, and he has found that employees miss an average of ten days a year because of sickness. More than six days of the absence result from ordinary colds and influenza. So naturally employers await the arrival of the vaccines, smiling and with outstretched hands. Obviously they are not the only ones, either; because we Americans are a sneezing, sniffing race, and the man who could cure us of it might well find himself in the White House.

—Crosson Howard

Boomerang



An Argosy Oddity

By HUGH B. CAVE

Author of "In the Bag"

I DON'T explain this story. It goes nowhere, it offers nothing, it has no beginning except in the thickness of a drunken man's tongue, and if it has an end I was not there to see it. Yet it troubles me and it will trouble you.

To begin with there were three of us in a place then called Kemal Sel's, which is in Sandakan on the northeast coast of Borneo, distant about seven days by steam from Singapore. The hour was near two in the afternoon and Sel's was an oven. The rain outside tumbled down from the hills, over the sandstone cliffs of Bahalla, in a deluge.

We were Kuyper, the cutch man, Matheson, the steamboat agent, and myself, Wilkes, of the B.N.B. Company.

"I ran into a queer one," Kuyper said.

He was home today from two weeks inland by river, by *prahu*, among the Kayan's of the upriver *kampongs* where still, despite trade and religion, the sav-

ages are children. He was home and glad to be home, and glad it was safe to drink again. He liked his rum. His belly was a barrel.

"I never did learn the fellow's name," he said. "We'll call him Smith. He—"

I said, "Wait." The fellow at the corner table was getting up. Was coming over.

He'd been there when we arrived, sitting in the gloom of his own thoughts. A white man but an odd one, bushy as a Hindu, his breed and age hidden by his beard. A derelict, perhaps, but that's a hard name. Few whites in Borneo are derelicts pure and simple. Drinking gets some; fever, homesickness, heat and rain and monotony get others.

He came over and nodded to us and said, "I've been working up nerve enough to ask to join you. Shouldn't, of course, but company's damned scarce and I'm fed up, being alone. Mind?"

You don't say no. Whites are whites, even with beards and sick eyes. I leaned back and pulled up a chair for him. We ordered drinks.

"This yarn of yours, Kuyper?" Matheson prompted.

Kuyper fished a pouch from his pocket—a new one, I noticed—and packed his pipe. "We'll call him Smith. I got the tale in a *kampung* deep in Kayan country. Diamonds up there, you know—small ones, not worth much, but plenty of them. Smith had his heart set on getting some."

You either liked Kuyper or you didn't. Most didn't, but it made no difference to him; he was big, important, he liked himself enough to make up for the dislike of others. I've called him a cutch man but that's leaving a lot unsaid. He'd come to Sandakan years ago as owner-captain of a freighter. He'd holed up, sold his ship and gone to work on a spirit farm, then bullied himself into a cutch concession and was rich now. And usually drunk.

He traveled a lot and told ugly stories. This was apt to be one of them.

"I was up there, you know, looking over the territory with an eye for raw

materials." He drained his glass and blew smoke into it, grinning. The bushy man sipped slowly and eyed him.

"This fellow Smith wanted diamonds. He'd heard there were plenty in this particular *kampung*—place run by an old *kapala* named Makali. He was right, there was a fortune, but he was too late. Fellow named Phipps was there ahead of him. Young chap, honest trader—the stupid, plodding type. Smith, of course, was a bad one. Like me."

HE LAUGHED alone. Matheson glanced my way and raised an eyelid, which was safe enough then because Kuyper was too drunk to notice. The stranger smoked and sat and said nothing, but his eyes belonged in the yellow head of a *krait*.

"This fellow Phipps had been there a week," Kuyper said, "and the Kayans liked him. It was up to Smith, of course, to pay respects. Common decency. But Smith heard about the diamonds, heard that young Phipps had bought the whole mess, and he put his brains to work. You chaps ever see a *lansat* pod, the poison kind?"

"Seen the fruit," Matheson said. "Tastes like a plum."

"Not the kind I mean," said Kuyper, his grin ugly. "Comes from a dwarf variety found in that region. It's a pod, about the size and shape of a lima bean but fragile. Powders in your hand when dry. Deadly poisonous. Worst poison I know. Well . . . Smith had some that he'd picked and dried and was intending to bring back to—that is, to take back with him. He planted them in Phipps' tent."

It was going to be that kind of story. You could see it in Kuyper's ugly grin, in his red-flecked eyes. And not because he was drunk, either. Drunk or sober his idea of humor was always the same.

I signaled the Hainan waiter, but the bearded man was ahead of me. He said, "Mine, this time," and pushed himself up. He was long-legged as a mantis and walked with a limp.

He brought the drinks himself and sat down again, and there was a lull while Kuyper rolled his glass in his beefy hands to warm it. A finger tapped my shoulder and I turned to frown into the withered Javanese face of Kemal Sel.

"Mister Wilkes," Sel said. "I like to ask you question, please. Private."

I was an old customer. I walked with him to the far end of the room, where he held out a wrinkled hand in which something glittered.

"That man—he don't tell me his name—he give me this to pay for drinks. He say it worth money. I take it, but I don't know. I never see him before. Maybe he cheat me."

I looked at the stone and suppressed an urge to turn and stare at the bearded man. I thought, "It's damned queer, his coming to our table like that, not naming himself." The stone was a small uncut diamond. You don't find them on the coast.

When I sat down again Kuyper was saying, "Well, this chap Smith went to old Makali, the *kapala*, with a cock-and-bull story that was sheer genius. He told Makali that Phipps was bad medicine. Phipps was the wickedest *bliam*—that's a witch-doctor, you know—that ever lived. Most likely Phipps was planning to put a curse on the whole *kampung* and destroy it, and it might be a good idea to investigate. You can make those simple natives believe anything, you know."

The bearded man said, "Can you?"

"You can if you're as smart as Smith was," Kuyper retorted.

"Well, the Kayans got Phipps out of his tent on a ruse and turned his stuff inside out. Of course they found the poison pods. That settled it."

"They—killed him?"

"Not in so many words, no. Wouldn't dare, with Divisional Forest Officers dropping in every so often. No . . . they just drove him out. Stripped him to his boots and trousers, hung the pouch of *lansat* pods around his neck and sent him packing."

MATHESON shuddered. The bearded man stared over the top of his glass and his breath made bubbles in the rum and his eyes smouldered.

I said, "He had no chance, of course. The jungle, the flies, fever, snakes, starvation . . ." and when Kuyper laughed I added, "Smith got the diamonds?"

"Bought them for a song. Smart man, that Smith."

Matheson said, "A dangerous game. Perhaps he underestimated the chances of this fellow Phipps."

"Eh?"

"With luck, Phipps might have reached some friendly *kampong*."

Kuyper drained his glass and blew a loud laugh to the ceiling. "Alone, unarmed, with nothing to eat but dried poison pods, he might have licked the jungle? Don't make me laugh!"

"There's a thing called justice, Kuyper," I said, "that sometimes gives a man strength to carry on."

He shook his head, scowling now. "More than likely he ate the *lansat* pods

to cut short his misery. Sensible thing to do, at any rate. One would be enough."

There was a pause.

The bearded man said, "I think not. I think he would have saved them."

"Eh? Why?"

"For Smith," he said and stood up.

He gave me the creeps, that fellow, and I was glad to see him go. I finished my drink and looked at my watch and said to Matheson, "Well?" To Kuyper I said, "Sorry to run off, but there's work to be—" and then I was silent, staring.

Something was wrong with the man. His square face was the color of goat's milk and smeared with perspiration. He sat like wood, staring at an object the bushy fellow had left lying there on the table.

It was a tobacco pouch, an old one. I reached for it and my glance fell on Kuyper's glass.

Something more than rum had been in that glass. A little brown thing, only half dissolved, shaped like a lima bean, clung to the bottom of it.



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Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint



IT SEEMS only the other week that we were wistfully searching the horizon for a good, clean controversy. The Evans-Ketchum feud about those (to us) still incomprehensible Britons, Guelphs, Ghibellines, Mercians, Hatfields, McCoys or whatever they were, seemed to have died down. Well, we turned out to be about as accurate in that as usual—or say, as accurate as the predictions that the world would end in the Year 1000. (Recently proved a misapprehension. Ed.)

So hold your hats, fellers. Here we go again.

As the man who started the whole thing, it is only fair to hear from Mr. Evans first—even if, this time, he's pleasanter to Mr. Ketchum, and pretty stern with our recent feeble attempt to pass off the whole thing as good, clean idiocy.

P. J. EVANS

I understand, of course, that even the gods nod occasionally, that editors are not omniscient, and that the best of writers may slip up now and then. This perhaps explains why another of your very excellent writers slips up in the current issue on page 81 by referring to members of the Moslem faith, as "two hundred wild-eyed Musselmen." I thought at first that he was referring to collectors of that delectable shell-fish known as mussels, but a reference to the context soon showed me that he really meant members of the Mohammedan faith. The fact that a member of the faith is a Musulman or Mussulman, and that the plural is Musulmans, may not be important, but it certainly lessens your reader's respect for your authors and their stories, when such mistakes appear in your pages. You might have your authors write up to your readers' intelligence, instead of down.

You say this controversy is out of your depth, and you want to "keep the heck out of it."

Howinhell can you expect to do that, when you adopt the nonchalant attitude of suggesting that when your readers find anachronisms or mistakes they mentally correct them and "re-christen" the characters. Such editorial laxity is inexcusable. Your authors should be "jacked up." I do not like to read about explorers in darkest Africa being attacked by a tribe of ferocious Maories, as I did in a contemporary recently—nor about the Comanche Indians being members of the Iroquois confederation, or Stonewall Jackson being a member of the Boston tea-party. Trifles, you say. True, but as Michelangelo said, "Trifles make perfection, and perfection is no trifle." Your authors should not be guilty of such schoolboy "howlers." "We, the people" demand greater accuracy from them, and you.

PRESTON, IDAHO

ALL right, all right, Mr. Evans. *Touché*. The whole thing *was* inexcusable. But even *we* know that the plural of Maori is Maoris, without the *e*. (cf. Webster). And we are willing to bet you never saw it any other way in these pages Until we can get your friend Mr. Angelo to come to our rescue with a little fancy double-looped proofreading, we'll just have to struggle along as best we can, enjoying the able defense of such stalwarts as

CHARLES J. JACOBS

In your issue of April 22nd I have read with interest the letters of P. J. Evans and Philip Ketchum. While Mr. Evans slings a mean javelin, it is quite evident that Mr. Ketchum himself is quite handy with what it takes to be a fighting *skald*. My remarks really aren't needed; but, because I've thoroughly enjoyed the Bretwalda stories so far, I take the liberty to utter a few war cries of my own just on general principles.

Mr. Ketchum is, of course, quite right in his attitude about his terminology, except that I

think he's more shy and retiring than he needs to be. For example, he accepts without protest the alleged Anglo-Saxon origin of the name *Caedmon*. So far as I know, there isn't any conclusive evidence either way, although we only have it in an Anglo-Saxon form. However, it doesn't necessarily follow that the name isn't really British. At least three similar Welsh royal names of the tenth century or thereabouts occur to me—*Cadfan*, *Cynan*, and *Cynfan*—and there are doubtless others as close if not closer. Anyone who knows anything about the mutation of names (e.g. *Havelock* from *Olaf*, although here the shift is the other way around—Teutonic into Welsh) will realize that any of these could easily merge into the form *Caedmon*, although I do not say that this is the case.

As for the term *Bretwalda*, I have three points to urge in favor of Mr. Ketchum's position that it refers to the rulers of "Britain." (1) This is exactly what the term means: *Bret-plus-walda*, "ruler of the Britons." Even though Anglo-Saxons bore the title, the first element is significant: evidently these rulers thought of their vassals as Britons. (2) The older conception of the Britons being driven into the mountains of the west by the Saxon conquerors is no longer considered tenable (see Lloyd, J. E. "Wales. History: I. 1 to 1485." *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. 14th ed., 1936. XXIII, 295). It is quite possible that Alfred's followers were as much British as Saxon although they spoke the latter tongue. (3) It is quite likely that the term is a translation of the equivalent Welsh term *Gwledig* (see Gardiner, S. R. *Students' History of England*. London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1891. I, 43-44).

Perhaps I am too uncritical in my attitude, but it is my feeling that Mr. Ketchum tells a good story which deserves applause for its own sake. I have a remote family interest in Ragnar

Lodbrok and some of these other characters, and—while I think the stories occasionally tend to make them a little too good or too bad—I want to be among the first to remark that Mr. Ketchum makes them live in a way which the histories, and even the sagas, too frequently fail to do. I look forward with interest to the rest of this series and venture to hope that when it is completed, Mr. Ketchum can be persuaded to undertake other fictionized studies of this period. *Heimskringla* is full of story material; let us see more of it used by the author who seems to be at home in this field.

MATHISTON, MISSISSIPPI

AND while we're still resting happily on Mr. Evans' beleaguered and well-intentioned neck, we might as well hear from Defender 2:

CHARLES FORD

I might be ignorant, but I don't like to be reminded of it so rudely as Mr. P. J. Evans did when he complained about the story of Philip Ketchum's in the last issue. I and all of my associates liked these stories very much and as long as they are interesting and in the true ARGOSY spirit, tell Mr. Evans we don't give a hoot about whether the locale, or whatever it is, is true or not. Especially in a period about which even the history books are vague.

I have been a steady reader for fourteen years and I have never written in before as I believe that the direction is in good hands; but I thought it was about time an old ARGOSY "hand" spoke up.

I like the new serial, "Minions of the Moon."

In fact I like all of the ARGOSY stories and this is the first time I have ever complained.

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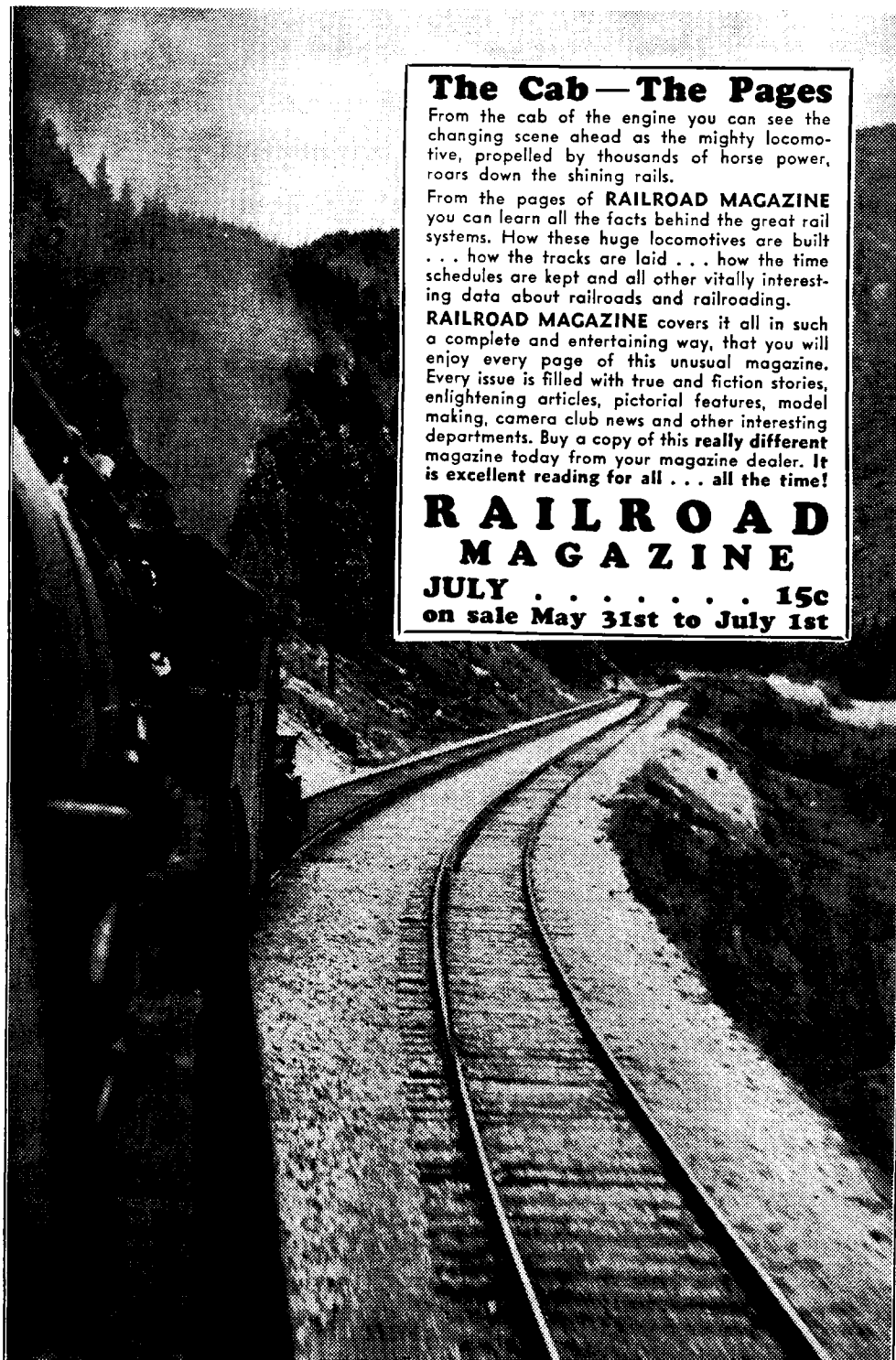
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